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GHOST RIDER

"Your next big Marvel horror classic is here."
— But Why Tho?

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GHOST RIDER
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When innocent blood is spilled, a ***Spirit of Vengeance*** is born,
and **JOHNNY BLAZE** finds himself transformed!

Marvel Comics *presents. . .*

GHOST RIDER

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NUMBER ONE

"Breakdown"

JOHNNY?
WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN, JOHNNY?
I DON'T KNOW.
YOU DON'T KNOW?
I'VE...BEEN TRYING TO WORK SOME THINGS OUT ON MY OWN, **DR. HALIGAN.**
AND HOW HAS THAT GONE?
NOT GOOD.
BAD, ACTUALLY.

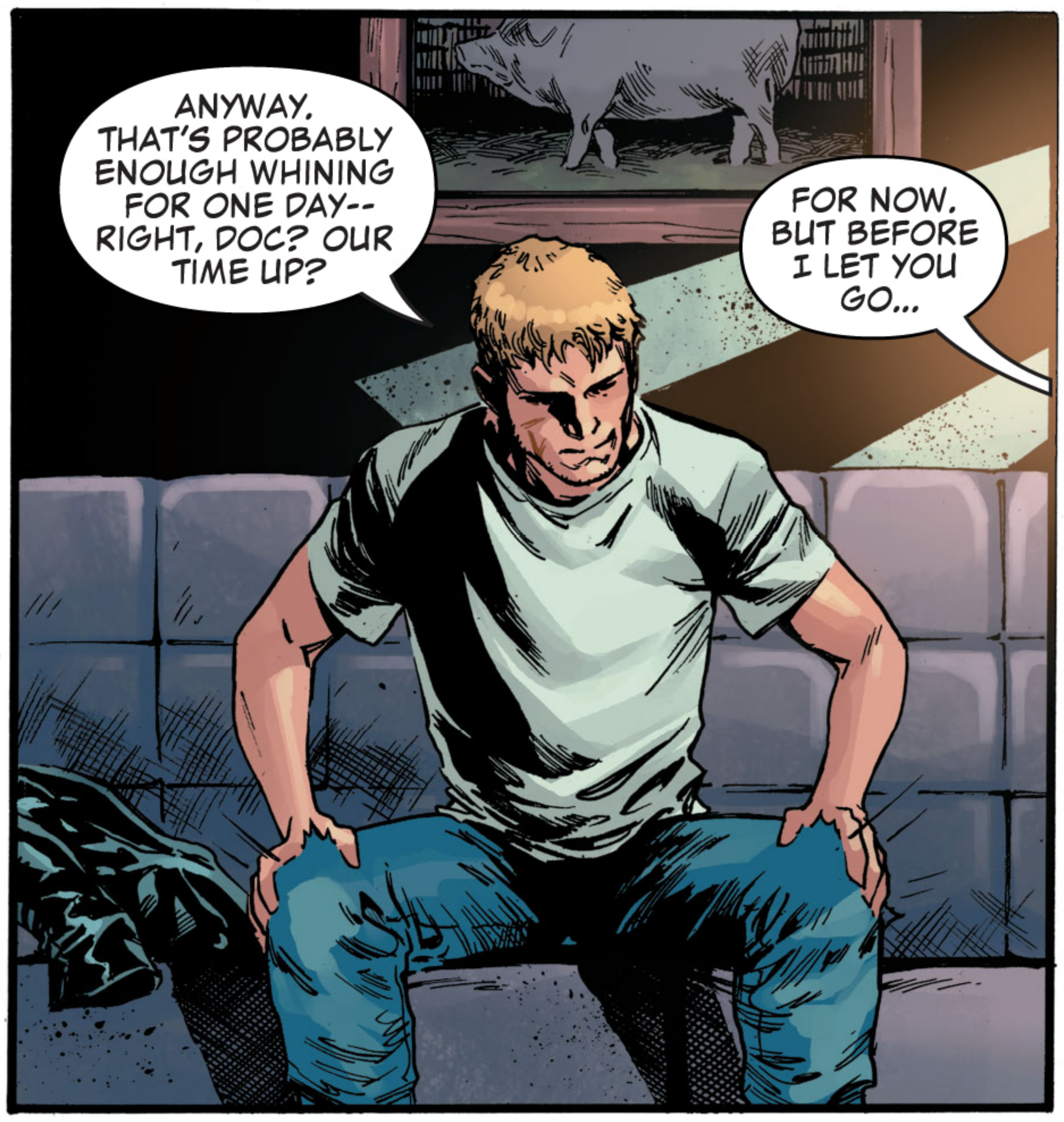
I'M SORRY I HAD TO REPORT YOU. BUT THAT WAS THE AGREEMENT YOU CAME TO WITH THE JUDGE. YOU HAVE TO HONOR IT.
I KNOW.
AND I THINK WE'VE BEEN MAKING SOME REAL PROGRESS.
YEAH.
HOW ARE THE HEADACHES?
HEADACHE, YOU MEAN. NEVER GOES AWAY.
FEELS LIKE SOMETHING'S TRYING TO GET OUT OR GET *IN.*
WHAT ABOUT YOUR NIGHTS?
THE NIGHTS? THE NIGHTS...ARE LONG.
TELL ME MORE.

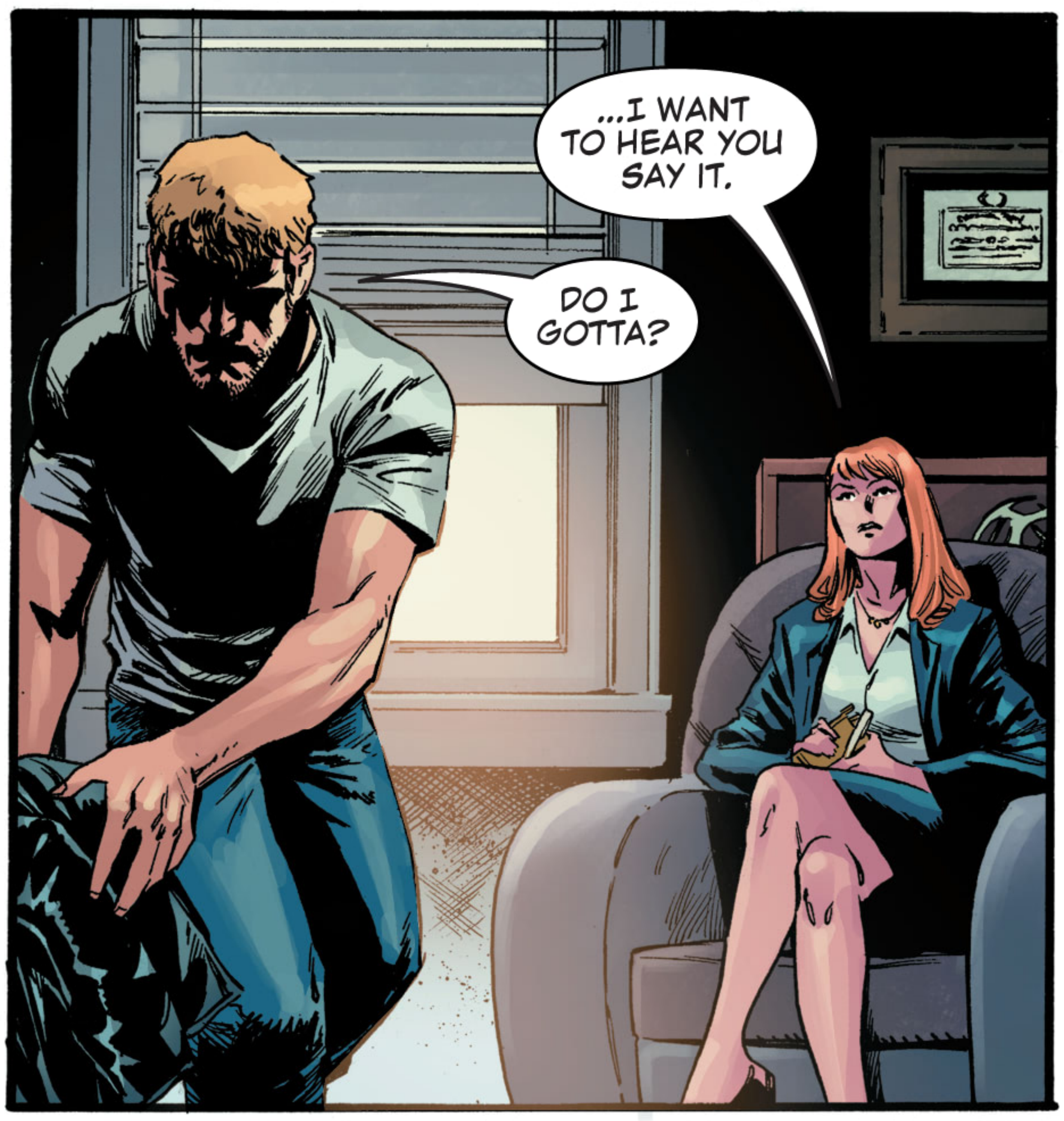
"WHEN I DRINK MYSELF TO SLEEP, MY BRAIN GOES BLACK LIKE A MIDNIGHT HIGHWAY.
"I'M NOWHERE.
"I'M JUST GONE. HURTLING THROUGH THIS GREAT BIG NOTHING.
"UNTIL DAWN COMES.

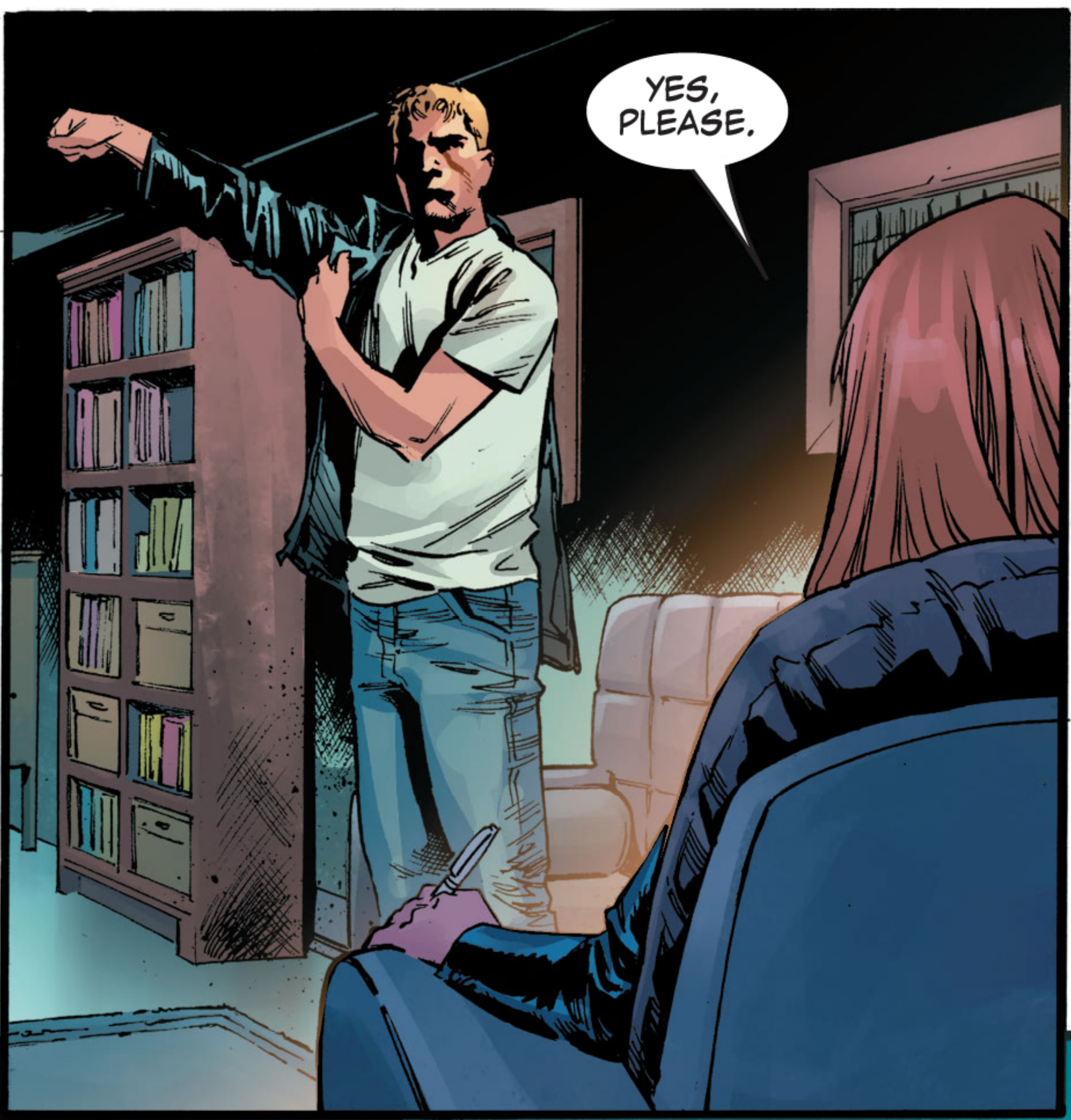
"AND WHEN I DON'T DRINK MYSELF TO SLEEP...
"...THE *NIGHTMARES* FIND ME.
"I SCREAM MYSELF AWAKE.
"I SWEAT THROUGH MY SHEETS.
"I SWING AT SHADOWS.
"I'M...NOT *SAFE* TO BE AROUND.

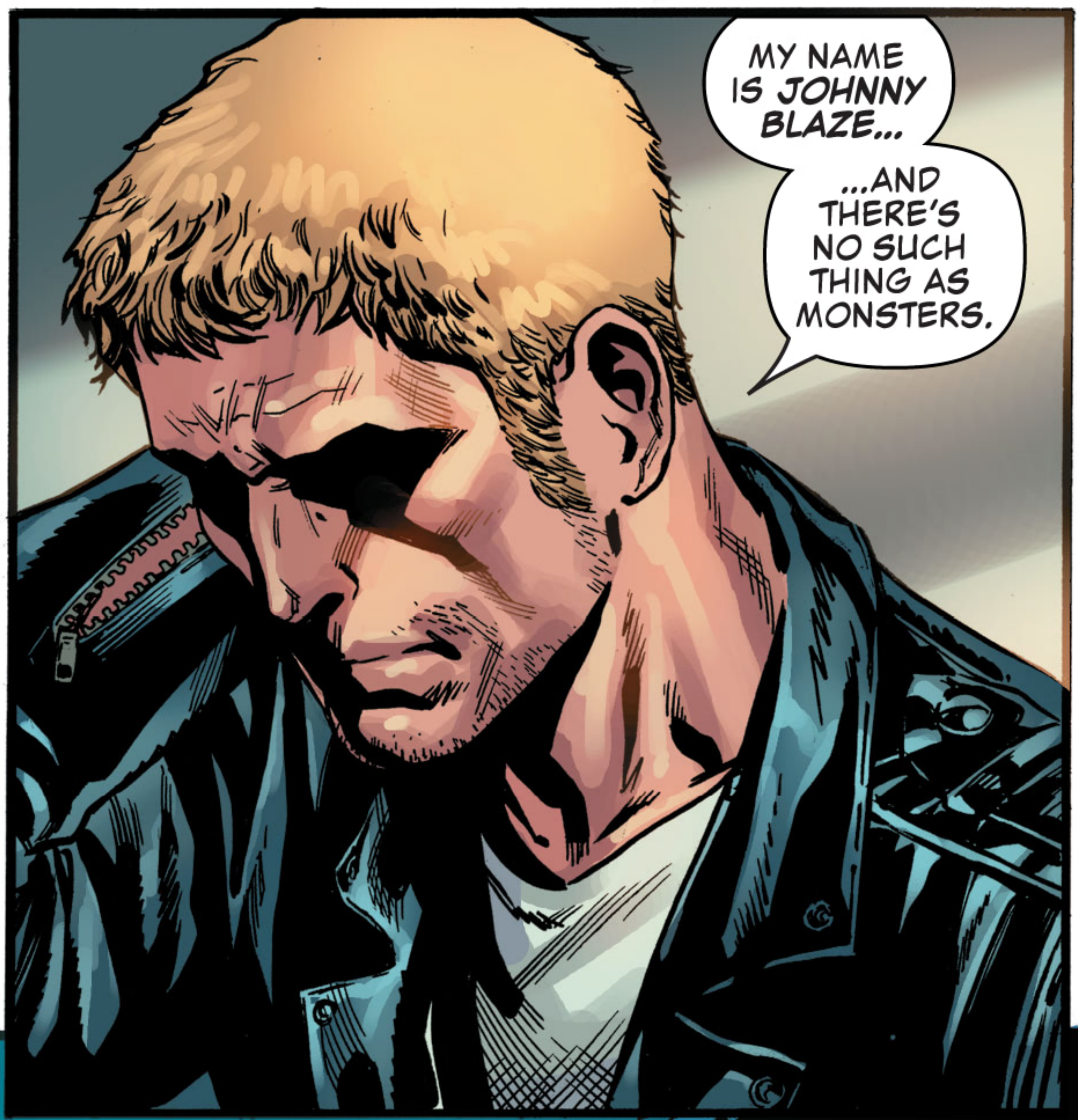
"SO MOST NIGHTS, I DRINK.
"IF YOU FILL UP A BIKE WITH GAS, YOU SEE MORE, TRAVEL FARTHER.
30 YEAR
"BUT IF YOU FILL UP A BRAIN WITH **WHISKEY**, IT HAS THE OPPOSITE EFFECT.
"EVERY SIP EMPTIES YOU FURTHER, SO THAT WHEN YOUR EYELIDS DROP, YOU SEE NOTHING, GO NOWHERE.
"THAT'S WHERE I'M HAPPIEST.
"*NOWHERE.*

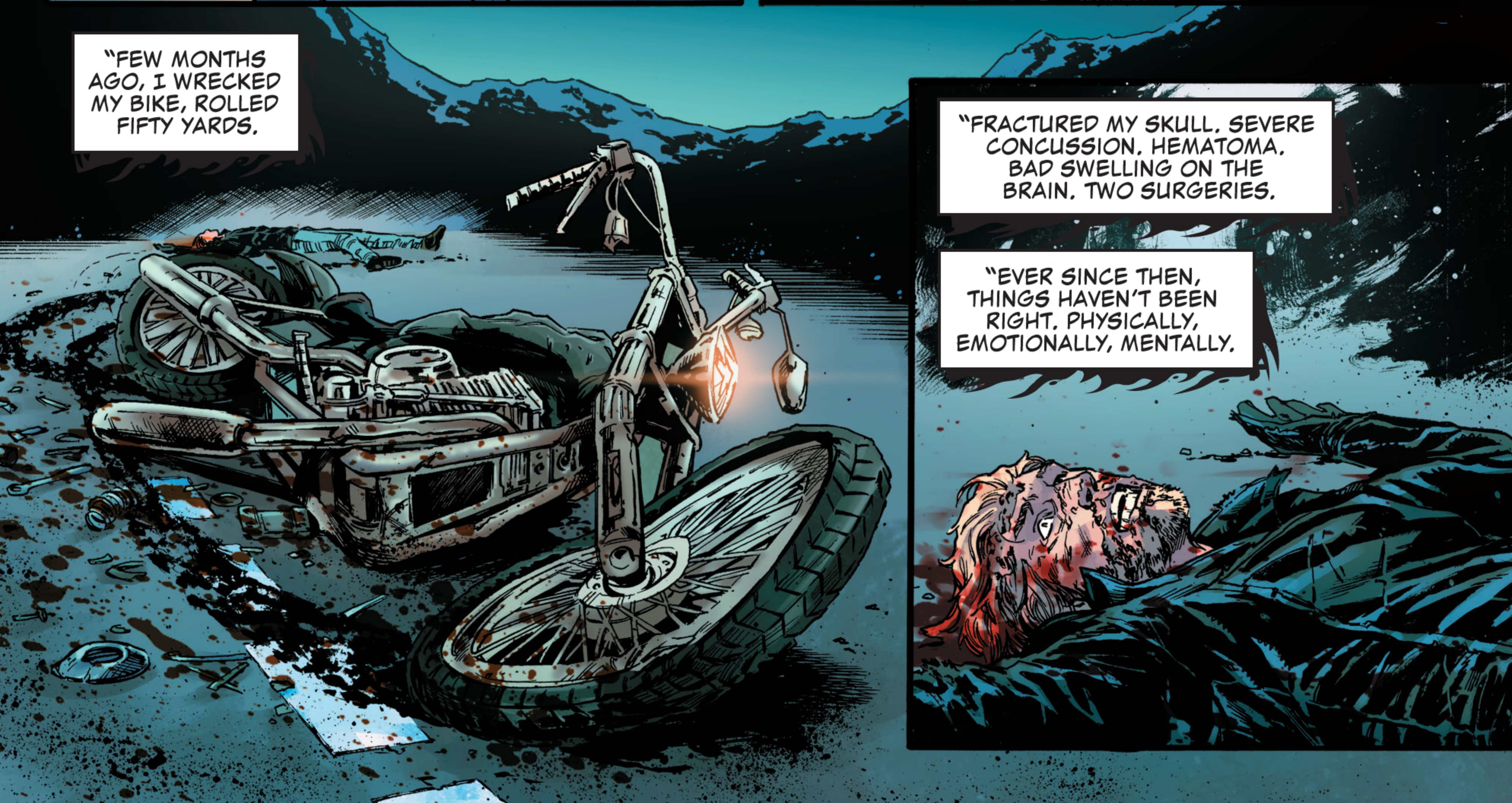
"I KNOW I SHOULDN'T BE LIKE THIS.
WORLD'S GREATEST DAD
"I GOT EVERYTHING A MAN NEEDS.
"MARRIED TO *ROXANNE*, MY CHILDHOOD SWEETHEART.
"RAISING TWO BEAUTIFUL KIDS, CRAIG AND EMMA.
"*HAYDEN'S FALLS* IS A SAFE TOWN, A GOOD TOWN.
"AND WE'VE GOT A PRETTY ROOF OVER OUR HEADS AND ENOUGH MONEY IN THE BANK TO NEVER WORRY ABOUT GROCERIES.
"SHOULD BE ENOUGH, YEAH?
"BUT SOMETHING'S ALWAYS *GNAWING* AT MY INSIDES LIKE TERMITES, HOLLOWING ME OUT.
YIP YIP YIP
"AND ALL THEM HOLLOWED-OUT PLACES GET FILLED UP WITH ANGER AND SADNESS AND DISSATISFACTION."
YIP YIP


ANYWAY. THAT'S PROBABLY ENOUGH WHINING FOR ONE DAY-- RIGHT, DOC? OUR TIME UP?
FOR NOW. BUT BEFORE I LET YOU GO...


...I WANT TO HEAR YOU SAY IT.
DO I GOTTA?


YES, PLEASE.


MY NAME IS *JOHNNY BLAZE...*
...AND THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS MONSTERS.


"FEW MONTHS AGO, I WRECKED MY BIKE, ROLLED FIFTY YARDS.
"FRACTURED MY SKULL. SEVERE CONCUSSION. HEMATOMA. BAD SWELLING ON THE BRAIN. TWO SURGERIES.
"EVER SINCE THEN, THINGS HAVEN'T BEEN RIGHT. PHYSICALLY, EMOTIONALLY, MENTALLY.

"I GOT MEMORY GAPS. ANXIETY. PARANOIA.
"LITTLE THINGS ANNOY ME. I LASH OUT AT PEOPLE.
"BUT...I GOT A FAMILY AND A COMMUNITY THAT CARES ABOUT ME.
"AND I'M GOING TO GET BETTER."
THANK YOU, JOHNNY. I KNOW THAT ONE DAY YOU'RE ACTUALLY GOING TO BELIEVE THOSE WORDS.
HRRM.
HERE'S A PRESCRIPTION I'D LIKE YOU TO TRY. HEAD OVER TO THE PHARMACY THIS AFTERNOON?
THE PILLS SHOULD HELP WITH THE NIGHTMARES.
Rx
THANKS, DOC.
OH, ONE MORE THING?
YOU'RE NOT EXPERIENCING ANY MORE WAKING HALLUCINATIONS, ARE YOU?
"NO...
YIP YIP YIP
"NO, THAT PART'S FINE."
SNAAAARRL

IF ONLY I COULD TAKE MY SKULL INTO THE SHOP FOR A LUBE AND FILTER.
CLEAR OUT THE RUST. WELD THE GAPS.
WHERE YOU HEADED, BLAZE?
JUST... WALKING, SHERIFF RIPER.
HAYDEN
JUST WALKING, *HUH?* YOU WALK EVERYWHERE NOW.
PEOPLE ARE SAYING THAT'S ON ACCOUNT OF YOU BEING ***SCARED*** TO GET BEHIND THE WHEEL.
COME ON AND GET IN. MAYBE I'LL EVEN LET YOU SIT IN THE FRONT SEAT THIS TIME.
I'M GOOD.
ARE YOU NOW, JOHNNY? I'M NOT SO SURE ABOUT THAT.
ALREADY APOLOGIZED FOR TAKING A SWING AT YOU.
THAT'S NOT WHAT I'M TALKING ABOUT.
I JUST PAID A LITTLE VISIT TO YOUR NEIGHBOR...
HAYDENS FALLS SHERIFF

"...MRS. GUNDERSON SAID SHE'D BEEN CALLING FOR HER DOG ALL MORNING.
"PIM PIM. I'M SURE YOU KNOW PIM PIM.
"LITTLE YAPPY THING. NEVER SHUTS UP.
"MRS. GUNDERSON SAID SHE HADN'T SEEN PIM PIM, NOT SINCE SHE LET HIM OUT FOR A WHIZ NEAR DAWN.
"THEN SHE CHECKED THE MAIL AND FOUND HIM SHOVED IN THE BOX. NECK SNAPPED. BLOOD AND #$%& ALL OVER HIM.
"BUT I GUESS YOU DON'T KNOW NOTHING ABOUT THAT..."

Toome's
PHARMACY
NOPE. DON'T KNOW NOTHING.
REARVIEW MIRROR SAYS OBJECTS MIGHT BE CLOSER THAN THEY APPEAR.
IMAGINE IF YOUR WHOLE LIFE WAS LIKE THAT.
IF YOU COULDN'T TRUST YOUR EYES.
THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS MONSTERS.
I JUST NEED TO KEEP REPEATING THAT, THE DOC SAYS.
CAN I HELP YOU, JOHNNY?
YEAH...
HELP IS EXACTLY WHAT I NEED.

NO MATTER HOW LOUDLY MY KIDS GIGGLE OR HOW PASSIONATELY ROXANNE DRAGS ME INTO BED...
...I CAN'T HELP BUT FEEL DISCONNECTED, NUMB.
SOMETIMES--WHEN I HEAR THE ROAR OF AN ENGINE ON A DISTANT HIGHWAY--SOMETHING MAKES ME TENSE UP.
MAYBE IT'S THE MEMORY OF THE ACCIDENT.
MY BRAIN MIGHT AS WELL BE MADE OF ROTTEN COBWEBS.
I DON'T REMEMBER CRASHING, BUT MY BODY DOES.
AND THAT FEELING--THAT SCARED, TENSE, NERVE-SHREDDING FEELING THAT COMES WITH THE HIGHWAY NOISE--I KIND OF *LIKE* IT.
IT MAKES ME HURT, BUT THE HURT IS *GOOD.*
THE HIGHWAY NOISE...
I KEEP TRYING TO IGNORE IT.

BUT THERE'S A WORLD OUT THERE THAT WON'T LET ME BE AT PEACE.
FBI HEADQUARTERS. WASHINGTON, DC.
I WOULDN'T NORMALLY DO THIS. I LIKE TO THINK OF MYSELF AS A COMPANY MAN, DIRECTOR CRUX...
...BUT I'M CALLING IN A ONE-TIME FAVOR AND REQUESTING A TRANSFER.
WHAT'S THE PROBLEM EXACTLY, AGENT WHILMER?
DIRECTOR Hamilton Crux
DIRECTOR Hamilton Crux
WELL...FIRST, THERE'S THE PARANORMAL UNIT ITSELF. THE ESSENCE OF IT.
THE ESSENCE?
I'M A BLACK-AND-WHITE, BY-THE-NUMBERS KIND OF GUY, SIR. I LIKE THE MATH TO ADD UP. I PREFER THE LAWS OF PHYSICS AND THE PERIODIC TABLE ON MY SIDE, IF YOU KNOW WHAT I MEAN.
THAT'S EXACTLY WHY I WANTED YOU ON THIS. YOU'RE A STRAIGHT SHOOTER. YOU CAN DIFFERENTIATE THE $%&# FROM REALITY.
PUT ME ON NARCOTICS, TAX EVASION, TERRORISM, ANYTHING BUT THIS. I LIKE THINGS THAT I CAN...HANDCUFF, TALK TO, LOCK UP IN A CELL.
HERE'S THE THING...
...WHEN S.H.I.E.L.D. DISSOLVED, THE GOVERNMENT WANTED TO REASSIGN SOME OF THEIR AGENTS. I DIDN'T HAVE A SAY IN THE MATTER WHEN THEY ASKED ME TO BRING HER ON.
DIRECTOR Hamilton Cr
DIRECTOR Hamilton Crux
WELL... THAT'S THE OTHER PROBLEM, SIR.

HER.
EXCUSE ME. DO YOU HAVE AN APPOINTMENT?
YOU CAN'T JUST--
I FOUND THIS GUY WANDERING AROUND IN THE HALL.
COULD YOU WATCH HIM FOR ME?
OH, GOODNESS!
DIRECTOR
Hamilt Crux
WELL, WELL. SPEAK OF THE DEVIL.
I NEED 500,000 DOLLARS IN EQUIPMENT AND TRAVEL FUNDS.
DIRECTOR
Hamil ux

YOU SEE? YOU SEE WHAT I'M DEALING WITH?
AGENT TALIA WARROAD... I'M NOT SURE HOW FURY DID THINGS OVER AT S.H.I.E.L.D., BUT--
I WAS A ONE-WOMAN OPERATION WITH A DISCRETIONARY FUND.
BUT... THE FBI IS A BUREAUCRACY. NORMALLY, PEOPLE FILL OUT PAPERWORK, PRESENT IT TO COMMITTEES, FOLLOW THE RIGHT CHANNELS.
OR, AT THE VERY LEAST, SAY PLEASE.
SO CAN I HAVE THE MONEY?
THIS IS ALL HIGHLY ABNORMAL.
PAST FEW MONTHS, ALL THROUGHOUT NORTH AMERICA, THERE'S BEEN AN EXPONENTIAL GROWTH IN SUPERNATURAL ACTIVITY.
I NEED TO SET UP A MOBILE UNIT AND HIT THE ROAD.
LET ME DO MY JOB.
I'M CURIOUS... HOW EXACTLY WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOUR JOB, AGENT WARROAD?
ISN'T IT OBVIOUS?

"I HUNT MONSTERS."
THERE'S NO REASON TO BE SCARED.
I'M SCARED, DADDY.
YOUR GRANDPA BARTON RODE BIKES. YOUR GRANDPA CRASH RIDES BIKES. I RIDE BIKES.
IT'S PART OF YOUR HISTORY. IT'S IN YOUR BLOOD.
BUT YOU CRASHED, DADDY!
YOU'RE GOING GREAT, CRAIG! JUST PEDAL!
YOU CRASHED!
-MEWL-
SORRY. CAN YOU CLEAN HIM UP? I'VE GOT TO GET TO THE SHOP.
YOU GO ON. WE'LL BE OKAY.

CRASH & BLAZE
AUTO SHOP
YOU EVER THINK ABOUT HOW YOUR LIFE COULD HAVE GONE A MILLION DIFFERENT WAYS?
YOU LEAVE YOUR DRIVEWAY FIVE SECONDS LATER, YOU IGNORE A PHONE CALL, YOU CHOOSE A DIFFERENT RESTAURANT FOR TAKE-OUT, YOU DECIDE TO WATCH TV INSTEAD OF MAKE LOVE.
EVERYTHING COULD BE DIFFERENT. THE SMALLEST DECISION IN THE PAST CAN RESULT IN A TOTALLY DIFFERENT FUTURE.
NOT SURE I'M FOLLOWING YOU, BUDDY.
THIS ABOUT THE *CRASH?*
IT'S ABOUT EVERYTHING. I FEEL LIKE... SOMEHOW I TOOK A WRONG TURN.
YOU'RE A GOOD HUSBAND TO MY DAUGHTER. YOU'RE A GOOD FATHER TO MY GRANDKIDS. AND YOU'RE A GOOD PARTNER IN OUR BUSINESS. CAN'T YOU SEE...
...YOU'RE LIVING THE AMERICAN *NIGHTMARE?*
WHAT DID YOU SAY, CRASH?
I SAID YOU'RE LIVING THE AMERICAN *DREAM.*

CHING
CHING
WELCOME TO
Hayden's Falls
CHING
CHING
STRIKE THREE!
YOU'RE OUT, LOSER!
THAT WAS A FOUL!
I BARELY HIT IT, BUT I HIT IT!
YOU GOING TO CRY, LOSER?

HE'S *LYING*. AND LIARS DESERVE TO BE *PUNISHED.*
WHY DON'T YOU SHOW HIM HOW WELL YOU CAN HIT, SLUGGER?

-SIGH- THIS SURE DOES SEEM LIKE A NICE TOWN.
POSTCARD PERFECT IN FACT.
WAK WAK WAK
APPLE PIES AND BASEBALL AND FIREFLIES AND FOURTH OF JULY PARADES AND SUNDAY SERMONS.
DINER
BUT SOMEBODY'S SCREWING SOMEBODY THEY SHOULDN'T.
SOMEBODY'S STEALING MONEY FROM THE REGISTER.
SOMEBODY'S GOT A BODY BURIED BENEATH THEIR ROSE GARDEN.

"GIVE IT TIME AND THE TRUTH WILL OUT."
WILL YOU SAY IT FOR ME, JOHNNY?
MY NAME IS JOHNNY BLAZE...
...AND THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS MONSTERS.
GOOD.
TELL ME-- HOW ARE THINGS GOING WITH ROXANNE?
SHE'S... WORRIED ABOUT ME.
GO ON.

"SHE SAYS SHE'S TERRIFIED OF WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF I RIDE AGAIN.
"DOESN'T LIKE THAT I KEEP THE BIKE AROUND."
JOHNNY?
HEY.
HOW DID IT GO TODAY? WITH THE DOCTOR?
FINE, I GUESS. SHE GAVE ME SOME MORE *CRAZY PILLS* TO TAKE.
DON'T CALL THEM THAT.
THE KIDS ARE NAPPING.
THAT'S GOOD.
YOU WANT TO TAKE A NAP TOO, BABY?

AND?
THE HELL?
HOW OFTEN DO YOU #$%&? WHAT POSITIONS DO YOU PREFER?
THE PAINTING...
NOTHING IS OFF TOPIC WITH ME, JOHNNY.
TELL ME EVERYTHING.
EVERY INCH OF CLAWED AND BITTEN FLESH.
DO YOU AGREE THAT PAIN IS ITS OWN KIND OF PLEASURE?

NO! I'LL KILL YOU!
PLEASE. PLEASE DON'T HURT ME!
I'M SORRY... DR. HALIGAN... I...
I DON'T KNOW WHAT'S WRONG WITH ME.
I'M GOING TO GO NOW.
I THINK THAT'S A GOOD IDEA.

THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS MONSTERS.
THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS MONSTERS.
PHAR
THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS MONSTERS.

DADDY!
WHAT'S WRONG?
JOHNNY!
HURRRR...!
YOU'RE SCARING THE CHILDREN...
...AND YOU'RE SCARING ME.
WHAT HAPPENED?

DENTIST FRI 12:30
YOU DIDN'T TAKE THE PILLS, DID YOU?
NO, I DIDN'T TAKE THE #$%& PILLS.
LET ME GET THEM FOR YOU. THEY'LL CALM YOU DOWN.
WHAT IF I'M *NOT* CRAZY?
YOU'RE NOT CRAZY. YOU JUST NEED TO HEAL.
NO. I MEAN... WHAT IF WHAT I'M SEEING IS *TRUE* AND EVERYBODY ELSE IS CRAZY?
YOU'RE HURTING ME.
I SAID YOU'RE HURTING ME!
I DON'T REMEMBER GIVING YOU THAT *RING.*
WHAT ARE YOU TRYING TO SAY?
FOR GOD'S SAKE, JOHNNY, YOU CAN'T REMEMBER WHAT YOU HAD FOR BREAKFAST YESTERDAY.
LET ME SEE THAT RING.
STAY BACK. YOU'RE SERIOUSLY SCARING ME.
DING DONG

YOU STAY THERE. YOU'RE IN NO STATE TO TALK TO ANYONE.
BEEN LOOKING NEAR AND FAR. SO GLAD TO HAVE FINALLY FOUND YOU ALL.
I'M SORRY... WHO ARE *YOU?*
NAME'S *ZEB.*
THE MAGICIAN
HERE'S MY CARD.
WELL, AIN'T THAT A LOVELY RING. MIND ME ASKING WHAT IT'S MADE OF?
JOHNNY!
THE MAGICIAN
GET YOUR HANDS OFF MY WIFE.
HATE TO BREAK IT TO YOU, PARTNER...
...BUT THAT *AIN'T* YOUR WIFE.

AND THIS *AIN'T* YOUR TOWN.
WHO ARE YOU?
I'M A SCOUT. SENT BY A GROUP OF NIGHT MAGICIANS. TO FIND YOU.
THAT'S A LIE.
YOU'RE THE ONE LIVING THE LIE. YOU GOT CHAINS ON YOU.
I DON'T KNOW WHO PUT THEM ON YOU, JOHNNY BLAZE, BUT IT'S TIME YOU SHRUGGED THEM THE--
VROOOOM
FALLS
ICE
KRUNCH

YOU CAN ALL GO BACK TO YOUR HOMES NOW.
EVERYTHING'S GOING TO BE OKAY.
YOU HEAR ME, JOHNNY?
BACK INSIDE. LET THE LAW HANDLE THIS.
WHEN YOU WENT DARK, JOHNNY...
...THE WORLD WENT TO *HELL.*
LET ME SHOW YOU.
NO!
LET ME SHOW YOU THE INNOCENTS WHO HAVE *SUFFERED* WHILE YOU WERE AWAY.

"WE NEED YOU.
the Red Eye
MOTEL
"OR RATHER... WE NEED WHAT'S INSIDE YOU.
"WE NEED THE SPIRIT OF VENGEANCE."

FWOOMP
COME BACK TO US...
...IF THE SPIRIT MOVES YOU.
WAIT! DON'T GO.
KAK KAK KAK!
WHO ARE YOU TALKING TO, JOHNNY? WE'RE RIGHT HERE.
HAVE YOU BEEN TAKING YOUR PILLS?
JOHNNY, GET BACK FROM THAT FIRE BEFORE THE ENGINE BLOWS.
NOBODY WANTS TO SEE YOU HURT AGAIN.
JOHNNY, IT'LL BE OKAY.
WE'RE GOING TO TAKE CARE OF YOU.

COME BACK TO US, JOHNNY.
WE LOVE YOU. WE NEED YOU.
PLEASE, BABY.
SNIK
HISSSSSS!

DON'T DO IT, JOHNNY.
YOU THINK THINGS WERE BETTER BEFORE, BUT THEY WEREN'T.
IT'S NOT A GIFT.
"IT'S A *CURSE!*"
CHOOOM

WHEN THAT HELLSTORM OF FIRE DESCENDS ON ME, I REALIZE...
...I'M ABOUT TO TRADE ONE PRISON FOR ANOTHER.
WHEN *HE* TAKES ME OVER, MY WHOLE BODY FEELS LIKE A FLAMING NEST BUZZING WITH HOT ANGRY WASPS, AND I SHRINK DOWN TO A BLACK SPECK AT THE CENTER.
WH-WHO...

WHO DID THIS?
WHO CAGED ME HERE?

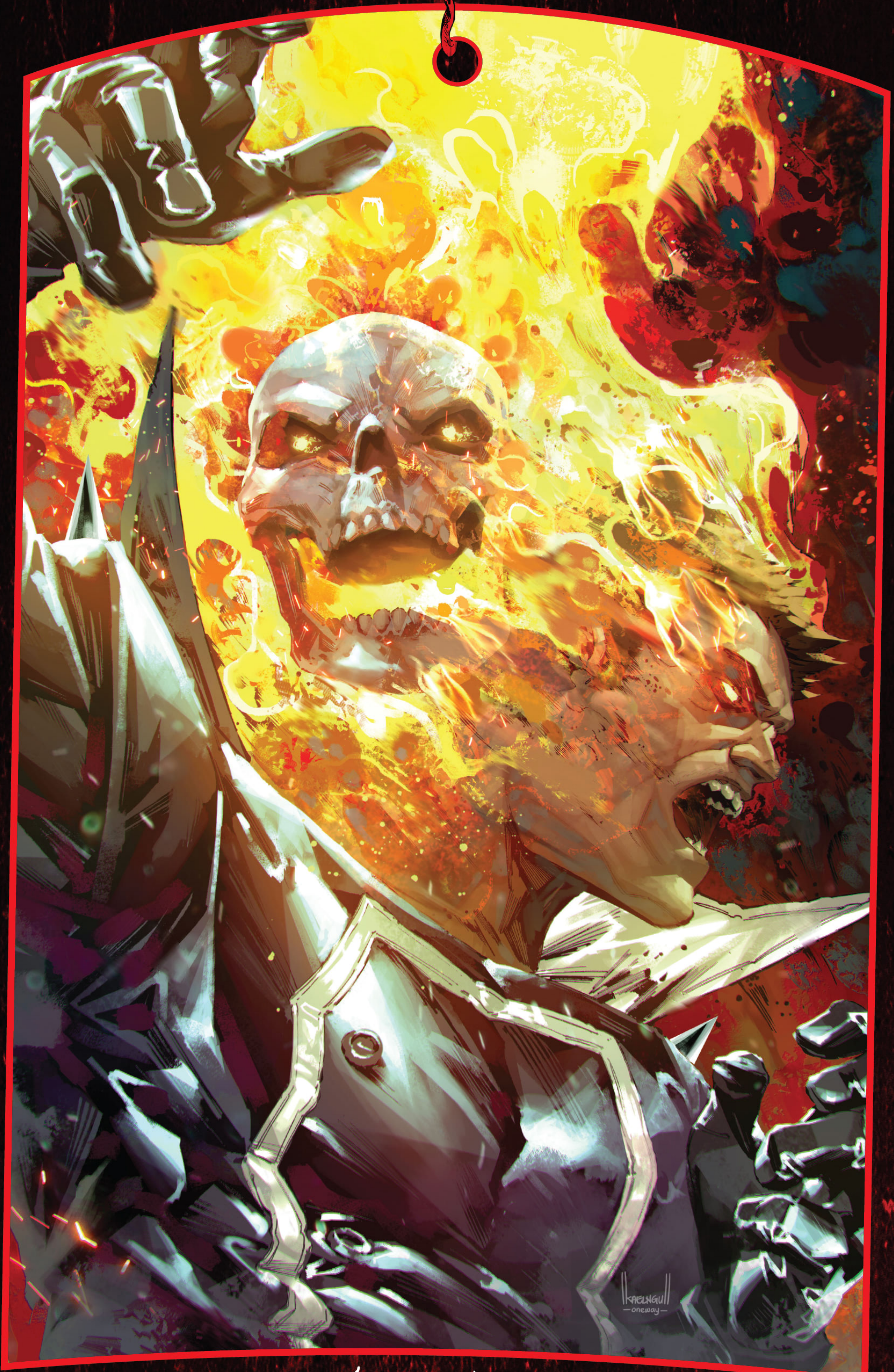
PLEASE, JOHNNY. PLEASE DON'T LEAVE US.
JOHNNY'S GONE NOW.
THERE IS ONLY GHOST RIDER.
WHATEVER YOU DO TO US...
...IT WON'T BE AS BAD AS WHAT HE'LL DO TO US.

WHO?
HE WHO?
SKELCH
JOHNNY? I KNOW YOU'RE STILL IN THERE.
YOU CAN STILL COME BACK. I NEVER HAD TO DIE.
YOU MADE A DEAL FOR ME--FOR CRASH--BUT IT WAS A BAD DEAL.
LET US TAKE CARE OF YOU. WE CAN MAKE YOU SO COMFORTABLE. WE CAN GIVE YOU EVERY PLEASURE.
THE *PAIN* IS THE PLEASURE.

I CAN'T CONTROL WHAT I'VE BECOME. I CAN ONLY OBSERVE IT ALL DISTANTLY, LIKE A HORROR FILM SEEN THROUGH A TELESCOPE.
MAYBE A CLUSTER OF DEMONS BROKE MY BRAIN AND SPIRIT, TRAPPING ME IN A SUNLIT PRISON.
AND MAYBE A DARK MAGICIAN BROKE ME OUT.
OR MAYBE THIS IS ALL ONE MORE HALLUCINATION.
MAYBE, ANY SECOND NOW, I'M GOING TO WAKE UP SCREAMING.
OR MAYBE A SEMI JUST CLIPPED ME, AND THIS WHOLE HEAD TRIP IS ONE LONG SKIN-MELTING SKID ACROSS THE ASPHALT BEFORE EVERYTHING GOES DARK.
THE ONLY THING THAT FEELS CERTAIN IS THIS--
--THERE *IS* SUCH A THING AS MONSTERS...

...AND I'M THE WORST ONE OF ALL.

NUMBER TWO



"Dark Places"

SOMETIMES, I GO DARK.
FOR HOURS. FOR DAYS. I DON'T EVEN KNOW.
IT'S HARD TO KEEP TRACK OF *WHEN*, LET ALONE *WHERE*, I AM.
I'VE GOT NO MEMORY OF MY CLOTHES BURNING OFF MY BODY.
I'VE GOT NO MEMORY OF THE BIKE BLAZING OFF THE ROAD LIKE A COMET THAT MISSED ITS TURN GOING 1,000 MPH.
I SHOULD BE *DEAD*.
AND THOUGH EVERY NERVE ACHES LIKE A HOT HANGOVER, THE WORST OF IT IS FOCUSED IN MY HEAD.
MY *DAMN* HEAD.

THE DOTTED LINE PAINTED ON A HIGHWAY INDICATES A FLUID DIVISION. YOU CAN TRAVEL BACK AND FORTH.
THAT'S HOW THINGS USED TO BE BETWEEN ME AND THE *SPIRIT OF VENGEANCE.*
BUT NOW... THERE'S MORE OF A SOLID LINE--AS YELLOW AS SULFUR--BETWEEN US.
I GO ONE WAY, HE GOES THE OTHER. WE STAY IN OUR LANES.
I'M JOHNNY BLAZE *OR* I'M GHOST RIDER.

THE PLATE OF A LOGGING TRUCK SEEMS TO INDICATE I'M IN IDAHO.
I'VE BEEN ON THE ROAD MAYBE A WEEK NOW. EVER SINCE I ESCAPED THE TOWN THAT WASN'T A TOWN, ***HAYDEN'S FALLS.***
BUT SAME AS A DREAM, IF I THINK TOO HARD ABOUT THAT PLACE, THE SPECIFICS START TO BILLOW AND DISPERSE LIKE FOG.
I WAS A ***PRISONER*** THERE. I KNOW THAT MUCH.
NOW IT FEELS LIKE I'M A PRISONER IN MY OWN BODY.
I NEED TO FIND A PLACE TO GET OFF THE BLACKTOP.
I NEED TO HEAL. I NEED TO THINK.
I NEED TO REMEMBER WHAT IT MEANS TO BE ***JOHNNY BLAZE.***
The CAVE INN

SOMEWHERE IN UTAH.
THIS IS ASSUREDLY NOT A GOVERNMENT-ISSUED VEHICLE.
WHY WOULD I WANT TO DO THE SAME THING AS ALL THE REST OF YOU BUREAUCRATIC ANTS?
BECAUSE, AGENT WARROAD... *TSK*--
RULES KEEP SOCIETY FUNCTIONAL--AND SINCE WE, AS THE FBI, ENFORCE SOME OF THOSE RULES, WE MUST HOLD OURSELVES TO STRICT STANDARDS.
I BET YOU DON'T LIKE YOUR FOOD TO MIX. DO YOU, WHILMER? I BET YOU OWN ONE OF THOSE SEGMENTED PLATES SO THAT YOU CAN KEEP YOUR PEAS SEPARATE FROM YOUR MASHED POTATOES.
I BET YOU COLOR-CODE YOUR SOCK DRAWER AND KEEP YOUR MAGAZINES ALPHABETIZED...
...AND YOU HAVE A LEDGER FULL OF WEIRD LITTLE LISTS, LIKE THE STATES YOU'VE VISITED, OR THE SCI-FI MOVIES YOU'VE SEEN, OR YOUR FAVORITE DINOSAURS.
HOW...HOW DID YOU KNOW THAT? ARE YOU... A *SEER?*
I'VE GOT SOME SPOOKY STUFF GOING ON UP HERE ALL RIGHT.
BUT I ALSO BROKE INTO YOUR HOUSE AND LOOKED THROUGH ALL YOUR STUFF.

LET ME KNOW WHEN WE CROSS THE BORDER INTO COLORADO.
WHAT ARE YOU DOING?
I NEED TO HAVE A THINK.
I'VE ALWAYS BEEN DIFFERENT IN A WAY THAT SCARES PEOPLE.
SECOND GRADE, I DREW A PICTURE THAT LOOKED LIKE THE BLACK SCRIBBLES INSIDE A WALNUT.
WHEN THE TEACHER ASKED WHAT IT WAS, I TOLD HER IT WAS THE CANCER INSIDE HER LIVER.
SHE WAS DIAGNOSED TWO WEEKS LATER. WHEN THE OTHER KIDS WENT TO RECESS, SHE KEPT ME INSIDE AND SLAPPED ME WITH A RULER UNTIL MY CHEEKS AND KNUCKLES BLED.
I TOLD MY MOM SHE HAD A BABY INSIDE HER BEFORE SHE EVEN PEED ON A STICK.
AND I TOLD HER THE SAME BABY WAS DEAD BEFORE THE NURSE CONFIRMED IT WITH AN ULTRASOUND.
I SEE BAD *THINGS.*
I SEE...

...A HIGHWAY THAT WASN'T ON ANY MAP THAT FEATURED FLAYED BODIES CRUCIFIED TO EVERY TELEPHONE POLE FOR TEN MILES.
A CHURCH THAT BURNED WITH THE CONGREGATION STILL PRAYING INSIDE.
A STORM OF BLOOD THAT LASTED FOR FIVE DAYS AND FLOODED A TOWN.
A RISING *DARKNESS* THROUGH WHICH A FACE KEEPS FLARING INTO VIEW...
...IN THE SHAPE OF A *FLAMING SKULL.*

THE CAVE INN, IDAHO.
I'VE GOT NOTHING LEFT IN THE TANK, BUT I DON'T DARE SLEEP.
I'M WORRIED IF I CLOSE MY EYES, *HE'LL* OPEN HIS.
CAVE INN
ON THE NEWS, I SEE THAT TWENTY PEOPLE HAVE RECENTLY DISAPPEARED ON A STRETCH OF HIGHWAY IN OREGON...
...AND I CAN'T HELP BUT WONDER IF I'M THE CAUSE.
KTSR 5
CURSED HIGHWAY?
MY BRAIN CAN'T BE TRUSTED TO KEEP TRACK OF REALITY RIGHT NOW.
IN HAYDEN'S FALLS, I BELIEVED THE INJURY HAD COME WHEN I WRECKED MY BIKE AND CRACKED MY SKULL.
MAYBE THERE'S A SHADOW OF TRUTH TO THAT.
DANGER
BUT WHATEVER'S WRONG, AND HOWEVER IT HAPPENED, THE FACT IS...

...I FEEL LIKE A *BROKEN* REFLECTION OF MYSELF.

DING
DING
OH, HI. SORRY...
...YOU CAUGHT ME *EATING.*
HEY. SO...I WANT TO BE STRAIGHT WITH YOU. I NEED SOME CASH.
YEAH? THIS GOT SOMETHING TO DO WITH THAT BIKE OUT THERE? LOOKS LIKE YOU'VE BEEN THROUGH A ROUGH SPOT.
YOU GOT ANY EXTRA WORK THAT NEEDS TAKING CARE OF? PAINT SOME WALLS. SCRUB SOME TOILETS. I'LL DO WHATEVER.
ANY KIND OF SWEAT AND BLOOD YOU NEED OUT OF ME, I'M YOURS.
SWEAT AND BLOOD, HUH?
WE COULD USE PLENTY OF THAT AROUND HERE.

I KNOW THERE ARE THOSE I COULD GO TO AND ASK FOR HELP.
BUT I'VE BEEN GONE FOR A LONG TIME.
IF NOBODY CAME LOOKING FOR ME...
...THEN I'M NOT INCLINED TO GO BEGGING TO THEM.
WHEN AN ENGINE SEIZES UP, YOU LET THE BIKE SIT...
...AND LET THE LUBRICANT SOAK INTO THE PISTONS AND COMBUSTION CHAMBER FOR A GOOD LONG WHILE.
THEN THE GRIME COMES UNSTUCK.
THAT'S ALL I NEED. A HEALING REST.
AND I CAN MANAGE THAT ALONE.
THMP

THERE'S A PART OF ME THAT WANTS TO PRETEND I DON'T KNOW HOW ALL THESE BROKEN PIECES FIT TOGETHER.
KRRSH
BECAUSE I CAN ALREADY FEEL *HIM* SPARKING INSIDE ME.
BUT I'VE NEVER BEEN ONE TO DRIVE BY AN ACCIDENT.
I MIGHT BE ABLE TO SWALLOW DOWN MY OWN PAIN, BUT I CAN'T ABIDE SEEING OTHERS WRESTLE WITH HURT.

I KNOW BETTER THAN ANYONE.
MOST PEOPLE HAVE AN *OUTSIDE FACE*-- THE MASK THEY OFFER TO THE WORLD...
...AND THEN AN *INSIDE FACE*-- THE RAW AND NAKED PART OF THEM THEY ONLY REVEAL BEHIND CLOSED DOORS.
SOMETIMES, THE INSIDE FACE IS TIMID AND VULNERABLE.
SOMETIMES, IT'S *TERRIFYING.*
BUT IT'S ALWAYS TRUE.
THE DARK PLACES ARE WHERE THE *TRUE FACE* HIDES.
ARRRGGH!!!

NO...
PLEASE. LEAVE ME ALONE.
I DON'T WANT...I DON'T NEED...
I'M SICK WITH...
...VENGEANCE!

TIME IS CRUSHED BENEATH OUR FEET.
THOUSANDS, MILLIONS, BILLIONS OF YEARS OF BANDED STONE.
LAYERS OF ROCK BRIGHTENED BY GEMS AND WHITENED WITH FOSSILS.
CAVES OF WATER WITH PALE THINGS SWIMMING IN THEM.
MOST PEOPLE NEVER GIVE THIS HIDDEN WORLD A SECOND THOUGHT.
UNTIL SOMETHING VIOLENT HAPPENS THAT KNOCKS A HILLSIDE OVER OR SENDS A CRACK RUNNING THROUGH STONE.
HFF HFF
OR UNTIL YOU START DIGGING.
DEEP DOWN, YOU FIND THINGS.
YOUR HUNGER IS AS GREAT AS A CAVERN.
I SATE IT WITH THESE OFFERINGS.
SECRET THINGS BORN OUT OF HEAT AND PRESSURE.

LATER, I WOULD LEARN THE THING'S NAME.
HUFF CHK CHK...
IT'S A SOUND, LIKE A MOUTH FULL OF EARTHWORMS, THAT CAN'T BE REPLICATED WITH WORDS.
IT HAD BEEN UNEARTHED LONG AGO WHEN SOME MINERS CRACKED OPEN ITS WOMB.
THEY WERE HUNGRY FOR GEMS... FOR MONEY.
IT WAS HUNGRY FOR BLOOD AND MARROW.
OVER THE YEARS, IT FOUND A WAY TO QUIETLY MAINTAIN THIS BALANCE OF APPETITES. MONEY FOR BLOOD.
VRRR
ELK. BEARS. DOGS. THE OCCASIONAL HUMAN SLEEPING IN AN ALLEY, A TENT OR A PARKED CAR.
VRROOOM OOOM
BUT LATELY, IT HAD GROWN MORE BOLD...

...BECAUSE THE WHISPERS IN THE SHADOWS TOLD IT, "YOU HAVE NOTHING TO FEAR."
BUT THE WHISPERS WERE WRONG.
THE SHADOWS LIED.
PENANCE.
CRK
YOU.

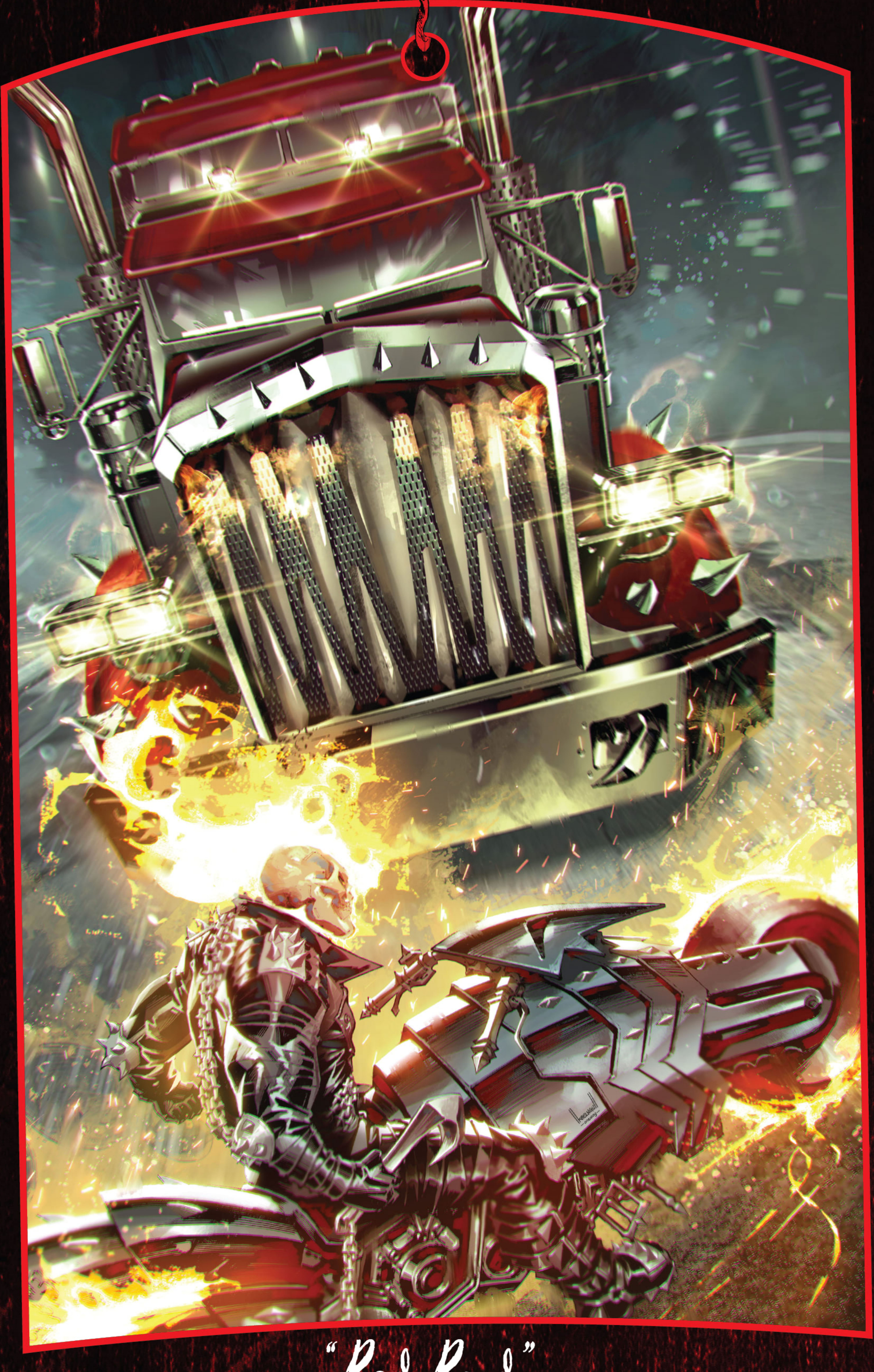
WHAT ARE *YOU* DOING HERE, RIDER?
HOW DO YOU KNOW ME?
WE ALL KNOW YOU.
YOU'RE THE FLAME THAT KEPT US IN THE SHADOWS.
YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO BE ***EXTINGUISHED.***

YOUR TIME IS SUPPOSED TO BE OVER...
...AND OUR TIME IS SUPPOSED TO BE NOW.
LET IT BE KNOWN...
...I RIDE AGAIN.
"FOLLOW THAT FIRE ENGINE, WHILMER."

BUT THAT'S NOT THE RIGHT--
DO IT!
THERE WAS A MAN. A MAN WITH A *FLAMING SKULL.*
HE DID THIS.

WHOEVER YOU ARE...
...WHATEVER YOU ARE...
...I'M COMING FOR YOU.

NUMBER THREE



“Red Road”

OREGON, CASCADE MOUNTAINS.
THE SPIRIT OF VENGEANCE HAS BEEN *USING* ME.
I MIGHT AS WELL BE A BIKE WITH A RIB CAGE CARBURETOR AND COLLARBONE HANDLEBARS.
A *VEHICLE* MEANT TO CARRY OUT ITS WILL.
SOMETIMES, I WAKE UP WITH PINE NEEDLES IN MY HAIR AND THE TASTE OF *ASHES* IN MY MOUTH.
AND SOMETIMES, I WAKE UP WITH *BLOOD* GLOVING MY HANDS.
SO I'M STAYING AWAY FROM THE WHISKEY. AND I'M STAYING OFF TWO WHEELS.
FOR NOW...JUST FOR NOW...WHILE I FIGURE OUT WHAT'S HAPPENING.

I'M THE ONE WHO'S BROUGHT US HERE--TO AN OLD STRIP OF COUNTY TWO-LANE THAT CURLS THROUGH THE CASCADE MOUNTAINS.
LOCALS CALL IT THE *RED ROAD.*
I'VE HEARD ABOUT IT--BROADCAST ON THE NEWS AND WHISPERED IN DINERS.
THERE ARE CLIFFSIDES WITHOUT GUARDRAILS. THERE ARE SKID MARKS WRITTEN LIKE CURSIVE INTO THE BLACKTOP.
THE WOODS ARE SO THICK IN PLACES, YOU NEED YOUR HEADLIGHTS EVEN AT NOON.
WHO KNOWS WHY THE ROAD WAS CUT HERE. MAYBE IT'S WHERE A BEAR USED TO WALK OR WOLVES USED TO RUN.
LOGGING TRUCKS HAVE HIT AN UNGUESSABLE NUMBER OF DEER, SMEARING THE ASPHALT *RED.*
THAT'S HOW THE ROAD GOT ITS NAME.
BUT SOMETHING HAS BEEN HAPPENING LATELY.
A CAR OR TRUCK WILL SET OFF AND NEVER REACH ITS DESTINATION. FAMILIES HAVE GONE MISSING.
IT'S ALMOST LIKE THE BLACKTOP HAS ITS OWN GRAVITY OR HUNGER.
THERE ARE RUMORS OF A *TRUCK...*

...A TRUCK THAT APPEARS SUDDENLY IN YOUR REARVIEW...ITS HEADLIGHTS BLAZING... ITS HORN HOWLING.
THAT'S WHAT'S DRAWN ME HERE.
THE TRUTH IS A LONG WAY OFF, BUT IT'S BECOMING CLEARER.
SOMEBODY-- OR SOMETHING-- WANTED ME OFF THE ROAD.
SOMEBODY--OR SOMETHING--WANTED GHOST RIDER IN CHAINS.
BECAUSE WHERE THERE'S NO FIRE, SHADOWS POOL.
SO I'M CHASING DOWN THE SHADOWS NOW TO FIND ANSWERS.

THE UNKNOWN CEMETERY.
SPLITCH
KAK KAK
KAK
KAK KAK KAK
SSSKELCH
KAK KAAAAK
YOU CALLED, ALABASTER.
I ANSWERED.

HRRRRR...
YOU CALLED, ALABASTER.
I ANSWERED.
I CALLED.
YOU ANSWERED.
AND NOW THAT WE'RE ALL HERE...

...YOU MAY COME FORWARD.
KAK KAK KAK
WHAT NEWS DO YOU HAVE FOR *THE COUNCIL OF NIGHT MAGICIANS*...
KAK KAK KAK KAK
...ZEBADIAH?
BUSTED JOHNNY BLAZE OUT.
BUT HE'S A DAMN MESS.
HE'S BLUNDERING INTO THE LARGER DESIGN. BUT THE SPIRIT OF VENGEANCE HAS GONE RABID. AND THE FBI IS ON HIS TAIL.
JOHNNY BARELY KNOWS UP FROM DOWN. I THINK WE SHOULD HELP--
NO.
NO, I DON'T THINK SO. WE'VE INTERFERED ENOUGH.
WHO ARE WE TO POLICE THE WORLD?
BUT--
DO YOU NOT HEAR THE COUNCIL'S WILL?
I HEAR YOU...

"...BUT THAT DON'T MEAN I'M LISTENING."
WHAT'S YOUR NAME, FRIEND?
JOHNNY.
DO YOU KNOW WHY I PICKED YOU UP, JOHNNY?
I PICKED YOU UP BECAUSE IT ISN'T SAFE.
HITCHHIKING, YOU MEAN?
IT ISN'T SAFE...
NEW ROADS ARE MADE FOR SPEED AND CONVENIENCE.
BUT THIS IS AN *OLD* ROAD. OLD ROADS TAKE YOU ON A DIFFERENT JOURNEY.
HONK HONK
YOU NEED TO GET OVER. *NOW!*
DON'T! YOU--!

HOOOOONK
GET YOUR HANDS OFF THE WHEEL!
I SPOOK EASY THESE DAYS, I GUESS.
DON'T YOU-- DON'T YOU DARE DO THAT AGAIN!
SORRY. APPRECIATE THE RIDE.
YES...WELL... HRMM...WOULD YOU LIKE AN EGG?
SORRY. DID YOU SAY AN *EGG*?
I ALWAYS CARRY A FEW ON ME.
THINK I'LL TAKE A PASS ON THAT.
LET ME ASK YOU SOMETHING ELSE.
HAVE YOU EVER NOTICED THAT THERE'S A BALANCE TO LIFE? THERE IS DAY, THERE IS NIGHT. THERE ARE GOOD TIMES, THERE ARE BAD.
OH, #$%&.

WE HAVE TO HAVE THE BAD. THE BAD IS AN INEVITABILITY.
THE ONLY WAY TO AVOID THE BAD HAPPENING TO YOU IS TO MAKE SURE IT HAPPENS TO SOMEONE ELSE.
WE NEED TO HELP!
KLIK KLIK KLIK
AS I SAID BEFORE...YOU CAN'T STOP THE BAD.
PEOPLE WHO TRY TO STOP THE BAD END UP GETTING GOBBLED UP.
THE ROAD IS BAD. THE ROAD IS GOING TO GOBBLE ME UP UNLESS I LET IT GOBBLE YOU UP FIRST. IT'S HUNGRY.
BLAM
WE ALL HAVE TO EAT!
SMASH
BLAM
KRIK

HEY! HEY, ANYONE IN THERE OKAY?
HENH... HENH!
VROOOOOOOO
SCREEEEE
HE WAS RIGHT, IN A WAY.
THERE'S ALWAYS A TOLL.
"HELL TO PAY" IS MORE THAN AN EXPRESSION...
KROOOM

...IT'S A LAW.
WHICH MAKES ME AN OUTLAW ON THE RED ROAD...
...AND ON EVERY ROAD THAT STITCHES THIS UGLY, HUNGRY WORLD TOGETHER.

SOMEWHERE IN IDAHO.
THAT'S YOUR DINNER, AGENT WARROAD?
BACON? JUST... BACON?
MIGHT AS WELL DIE DELICIOUSLY, WHILMER.
I DON'T LIKE THE WAY YOU'RE LOOKING AT ME.
TWENTY BUCKS SAYS I CAN TELL YOU WHAT YOU'RE TYPING INTO THAT LITTLE COMPUTER OF YOURS.
I DON'T GAMBLE.
TWENTY BUCKS SAYS, WHILMER.
SIGH CLEARLY YOU'RE NOT GOING TO STOP UNTIL I GIVE UP. SO LET'S JUST GET THIS OVER WITH. WHAT AM I TYPING INTO MY LITTLE COMPUTER?
WELL, YOU JUST CLICKED IT OVER A SECOND AGO TO SPIDER SOLITAIRE, BUT YOU'VE BEEN RESEARCHING MY FILES.
TAP TAP TAP
I HAVE NOT. NO. I-- NO, THAT'S NOT--
YOU COULD HAVE JUST ASKED ME.

"I USED TO BE SCARED OF THE DARK.
"BECAUSE THE DARK SHOWED ME BAD THINGS.
"WHEN THE DARK WHISPERED TO ME...
"...I USED A SHARP ROCK TO CARVE ***CHEATER*** INTO THE HOOD OF OUR NEIGHBOR'S CAR AFTER HE SLEPT WITH AN OLD CLASSMATE ON A BUSINESS TRIP.
"WHEN THE DARK PLAYED SHADOWS ON THE WALL...
"...I CALLED THE POLICE AND TOLD THEM THERE WAS A 10-YEAR-OLD CORPSE BURIED IN THE BACKYARD OF A CITY COUNCIL MEMBER.
"BECAUSE I KNEW THINGS--SECRET THINGS--PEOPLE ***HATED*** ME.
"I NEEDED TO BE STRONG ENOUGH TO WITHSTAND THAT HATE. HOW?
"ONE DAY, I IMAGINED A DOOR IN MY CHEST.
"AND WHEN I OPENED IT...
"...I REALIZED I DIDN'T NEED TO BE AFRAID OF THE DARK.
"BECAUSE I ***WAS*** THE DARK."

ONE CHECK, OR ARE WE SPLITTING IT?
ONE.
HE'S GOT IT.
WAIT--! HELP ME UNDERSTAND... HOW DOES YOUR STORY CONNECT TO THE CASE WE'RE WORKING?
A DOOR IN SOMEBODY ELSE'S CHEST HAS OPENED UP, AND ALL SORTS OF DARKNESS IS SPILLING OUT.
KAK
KAK
KAK
AND THIS SO-CALLED *GHOST RIDER* SEEMS TO BE AT THE CENTER OF IT.

THE SPIRIT OF VENGEANCE IS CAGED UP INSIDE ME, BUT THE LOCK IS LOOSE... THE HINGES ARE RUSTY.
IF I'M NOT CAREFUL, HE CRASHES HIS WAY OUT. MORE OF A *WEAPON* THAN AN ALLY.
RUMM
I LOSE CONTROL--FOR HOURS, POTENTIALLY DAYS--WITH NO KNOWLEDGE OF THE WRECKAGE I'VE LEFT BEHIND.
RUMM
RUMMMMMM
HELP...
BUT...I CAN'T DO THIS ALONE.
RIGHT NOW, THE ONLY WAY TO MANAGE THE GHOST RIDER...
SCREEE
...SEEMS TO BE TO POINT HIM IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION.

AND THE BLOOD OF INNOCENTS...
...IS LIKE DIESEL TOSSED ON A HELLFIRE.
MISTER...
GO... RUN.
YOU DON'T WANT TO BE HERE FOR THIS!

I DON'T KNOW WHAT HAPPENED ON THE RED ROAD THAT NIGHT.
BUT I WOKE UP THE NEXT MORNING NEXT TO A DUMPSTER BEHIND A GAS STATION...WITH A MEMORY LINGERING IN MY HEAD.
IT WAS MY FINAL GLIMPSE OF THE WORLD BEFORE EVERYTHING WENT BLACK.
THE TREES ALONG THE SIDE OF THE HIGHWAY HAD BEEN REPLACED BY ***SOULS***, TWISTED IN TORMENT.
THE BLACKTOP HAD BEEN REPLACED BY A RIVER OF SHADOWS.
IT WAS JUST A FLASH--A HALF BLINK OF AN EYE--BUT IT REMINDED ME OF HAYDEN'S FALLS.
THE TOWN WAS THERE, BUT NOT THERE.
JUST LIKE THE ***CAVE INN*** MOTEL LOOKED LIKE ONE THING ON THE OUTSIDE BUT ANOTHER ON THE INSIDE.
THE MAN WITH A TRUNK FULL OF BODIES AND THE ROARING HUNGER OF THE HELL TRUCK FELT LIKE FAMILIAR ROADSIDE ATTRACTIONS.
IN ALL OF THESE PLACES, THERE WERE ***SERVANTS*** AND THERE WERE ***BEASTS*** AND THERE WAS ***SACRIFICE***.
THERE WAS HELL TO PAY.

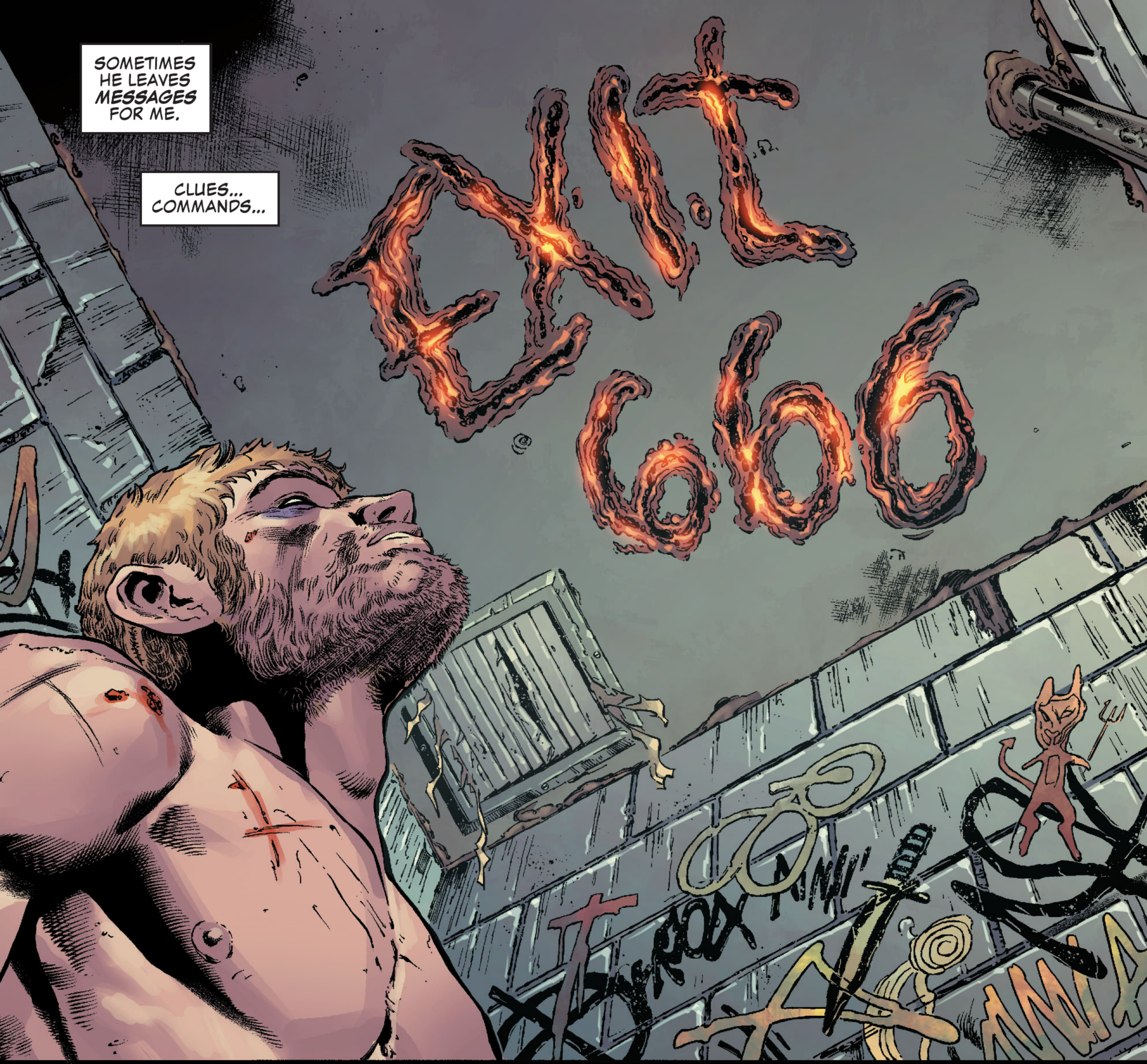
NO ONE STUDIES *MAPS* ANYMORE. EVERYONE FOLLOWS THEIR PHONES.
AND WHEN YOU DON'T MEMORIZE STREET NAMES AND EXIT RAMPS...
...WHEN YOU DON'T STUDY LANDMARKS... LIKE THE ABANDONED SILO OR THE OAK TREE WITH THE LIGHTNING SCAR RUNNING DOWN THE TRUNK...
...YOU BECOME DISCONNECTED TO THE WORLD SCROLLING PAST YOUR WINDOW.
YOU DON'T KNOW WHERE YOU ARE.
NOBODY KNOWS WHERE THEY ARE ANYMORE.
WE'RE ALL *LOST*.
BECAUSE NO ONE IS PAYING ATTENTION, IT MAKES SENSE THAT THERE WOULD BE HIDDEN POCKETS.
WAYS THAT EXIST OUTSIDE THE GAZE OF SEARCH ENGINES AND SATELLITE VIEWS.

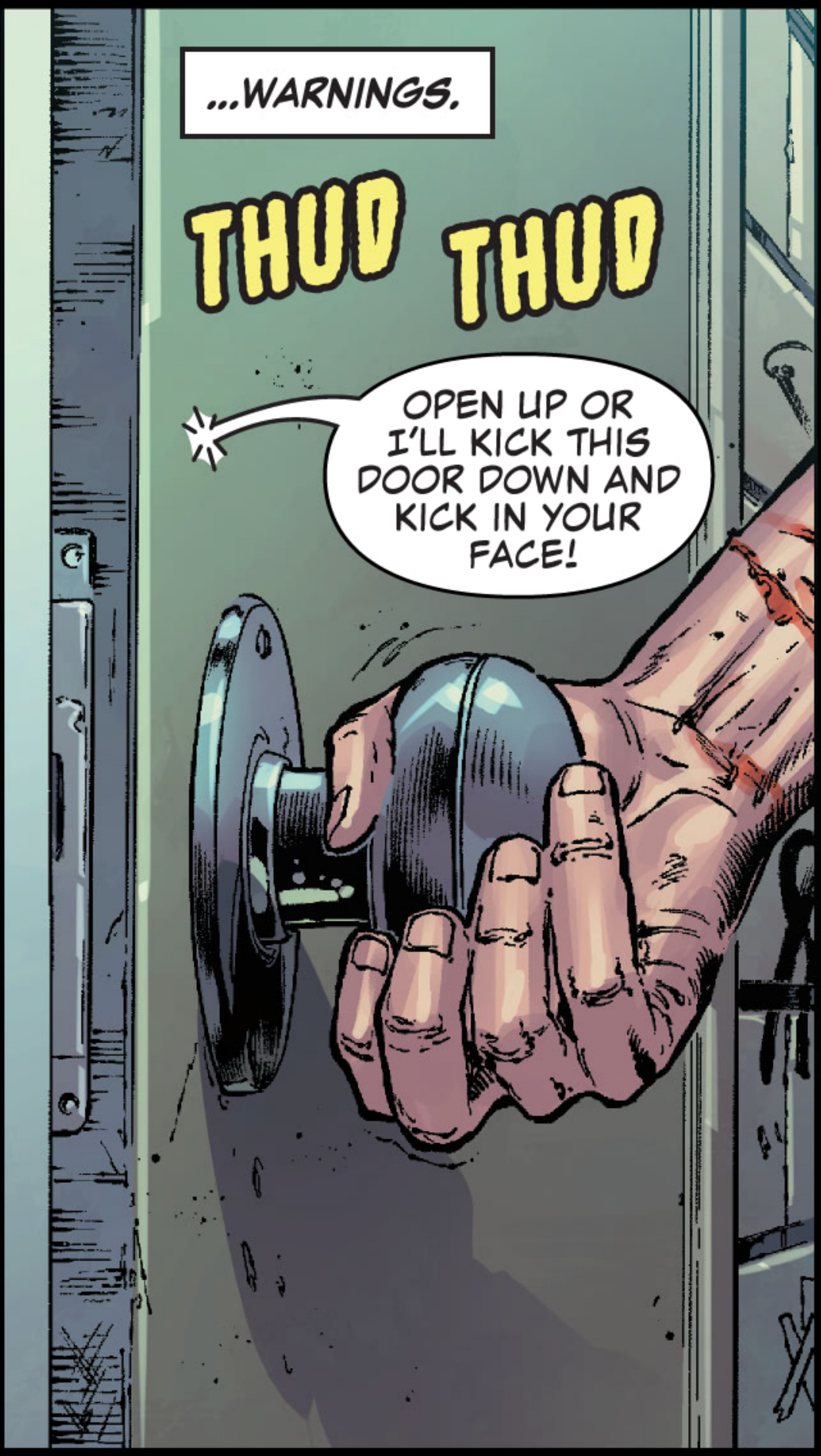
PLACES WHERE HUNGRY THINGS HIDE, WHERE DARK THINGS CROUCH AND SNARL AND BABBLE.
THIS IS WHERE YOU'LL FIND BLOOD, WHISPERS, SECRETS, MONSTERS AND SHADOWS.
THE SHADOW COUNTRY.
WHAT?
WHO SAID THAT?

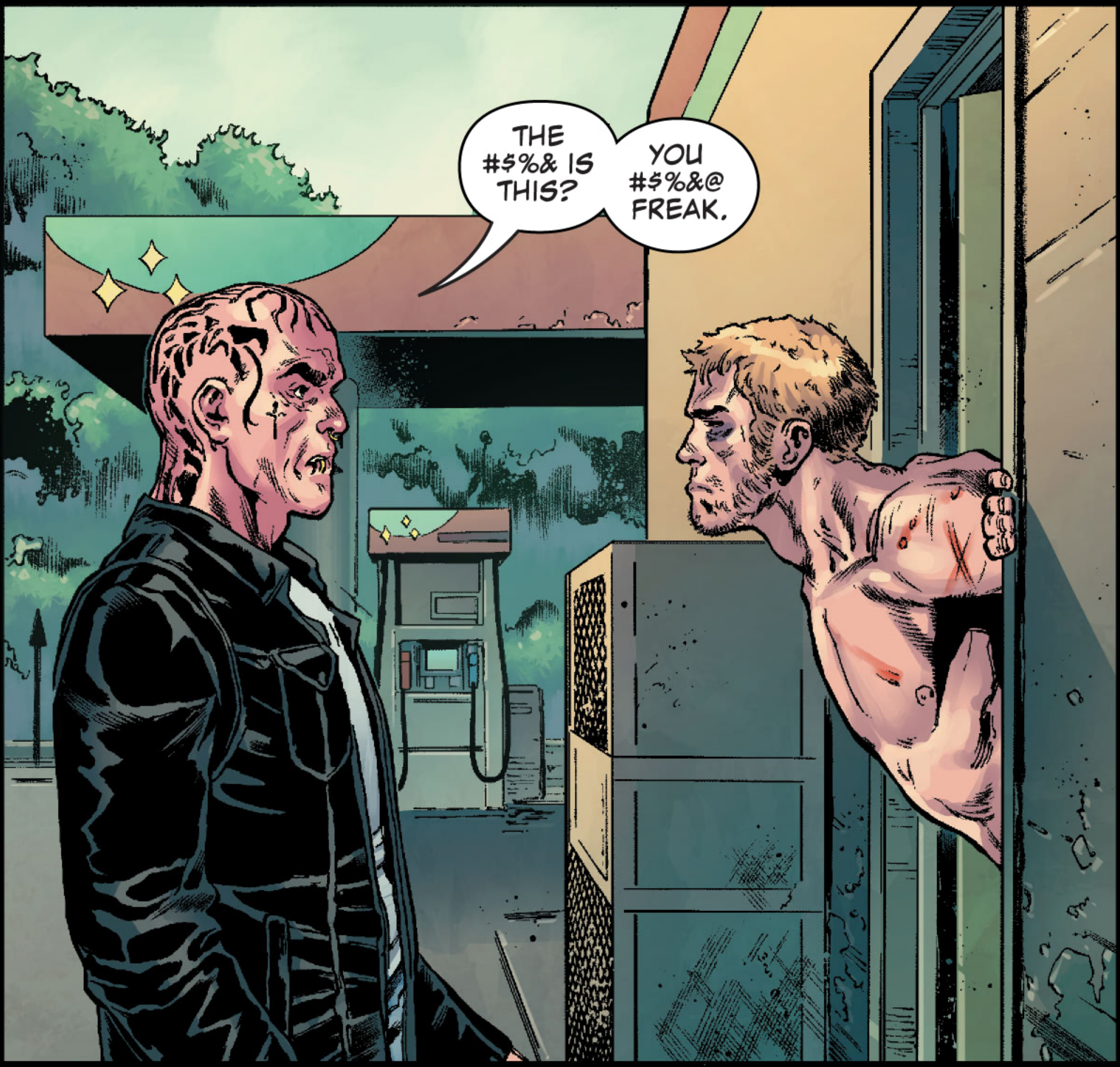
NUMBER FOUR

"Blood Circus"

WHENEVER I WAKE UP, IT'S THE SAME AS IF I'M COMING OFF A HARD NIGHT OF DRINKING.
THUD THUD THUD THUD
MY MIND CHUGS THROUGH THE STANDARD QUESTIONS...
HOW DID I END UP HERE? WHAT HAVE I DONE?
THUD THUD THUD
EVERYTHING'S MUDDY AND UNCERTAIN.
THINKING TOO HARD ABOUT ANYTHING HURTS.
THUD THUD
WHATEVER HAPPENED IN THE NIGHT IS LIKE A FADED BRUISE OR A ROAD SIGN GLIMPSED AT ONE HUNDRED MPH.
OPEN UP!
IT'S HIS FAULT.
OPEN THE @#%& UP!


SOMETIMES HE LEAVES *MESSAGES* FOR ME.
CLUES... COMMANDS...
EXIT 666


...WARNINGS.
THUD THUD
OPEN UP OR I'LL KICK THIS DOOR DOWN AND KICK IN YOUR FACE!


THE #$%& IS THIS?
YOU #$%&@ FREAK.

YOU WANT IN?
KRNCH
ALL YOURS.
I'M DOING THE BEST I CAN WITH WHAT LITTLE I GOT.
MIGHT HAVE HOURS, MIGHT HAVE DAYS.
SO I NEED TO DO AS MUCH LIVING AND COVER AS MUCH TERRITORY AS I CAN BEFORE MY TANK RUNS DRY.

SOMEWHERE IN IDAHO.
DENT BROS AUTO REPAIR
BRING THE DISCRETIONARY MONEY, WHILMER.
WHY?
JUST DO IT.
LOOKS LIKE THAT RIDE OF YOURS COULD USE SOME HELP.
YES. BUT BEFORE THAT HAPPENS, WE NEED YOUR GARAGE.
NOT SURE I UNDERSTAND?
GIVE HIM THE CASH FROM THE DISCRETIONARY ACCOUNT. LUNCH IS ON THE F.B.I.
WHAT? AGENT WARROAD-- WHY?
BECAUSE WE NEED TO GET AWAY FROM PRYING EYES.
WHEN YOU SETTLE UP WITH THESE GENTLEMEN, BRING ME THE SALT SHAKERS I STOLE FROM THE DINER.

THERE YOU ARE.
YES. YOU'RE A *MEAN* ONE, AREN'T YOU?
THIS WILL BE INTERESTING.
WHAT ARE WE DOING?
EXIT
WE'RE FIXING A PROBLEM.
CHK CHK
JUST SO YOU KNOW, I'VE REQUESTED A TRANSFER.

DIRECTOR CRUX WILL DENY IT.
HE NEEDS YOU TO *SPY* ON ME.
WE'RE STUCK WITH EACH OTHER.
I KNOW THERE'S A PART OF YOU THAT'S SECRETLY *HAPPY* ABOUT IT.
THE PART OF YOU THAT PRESSES YOUR EAR AGAINST THE WALL OF THE MOTEL AT NIGHT, LISTENING FOR THE NOISES I MAKE IN THE NEXT ROOM.
GIVE ME YOUR HAND.
WHY?
BECAUSE YOU HAVE TO PAY...
AAIIEE!
SLLLSH
...IF YOU WANT SOMETHING IN RETURN.

NOW DON'T SAY ANYTHING.
AND WHATEVER YOU DO...
...DON'T GO INSIDE THE CIRCLE.
DEAR GOD...
NO. THIS ISN'T GOD'S WORK.

WHAT'S HAPPENING?
WHO-- WHO IS THAT?
SHUT UP.
I NEED TO *CONCENTRATE.*
NICE LITTLE TRICK YOU PULLED THERE, GIRLIE.
YOU MIGHT HAVE TRASHED MY CAR, BUT YOU CAN'T STOP ME.
WHY DON'T YOU WANT ME TO FIND THE GHOST RIDER?
IF YOU THINK I'M GOING TO GIVE YOU WHAT YOU WANT, YOU COULDN'T BE MORE WRONG.
YOU'VE @#$%& WITH THE WRONG MAGICIAN.

THORN, SOUTH DAKOTA.
THORN
Exit 666
THE SPIRIT OF VENGEANCE SENT ME HERE-- TO A PLACE NO ONE ELSE WOULD EVER GO.
THERE ARE A LOT OF EMPTY PLACES IN AMERICA.
FORGOTTEN PLACES.
PLACES THAT FEEL LIKE THEY CROUCH IN THE SHADOWS OF L.A., CHICAGO AND NEW YORK.
PLACES YOU WOULDN'T EVER STOP UNLESS YOU NEEDED TO FILL UP ON GAS OR TAKE A PISS.
IF THEY VANISHED, HOW MANY WOULD EVEN NOTICE?
HELLO?

I FEEL A KIND OF KINSHIP TO A PLACE LIKE THIS.
I WAS GONE FOR A LONG TIME...
...AND NOBODY SEEMED TO GIVE A DAMN EXCEPT THE PEOPLE AND THE THINGS I'M KNOWN FOR HUNTING.
THE PARK GIVES ME THE ANSWER I'M LOOKING FOR.
I CAN STILL SMELL THE POPCORN AND ROASTED PEANUTS.
I CAN PRACTICALLY HEAR THE CHEERS OF THE CROWD, THE ROAR OF A LION, THE TOOT AND JANGLE OF CALLIOPE MUSIC.
THE *CIRCUS* HAS COME TO TOWN.
COME SEE THE
CIRCUS

SOMEWHERE IN MINNESOTA.
THE TENT WOULD APPEAR AT SUNSET.
THERE WAS NO ANNOUNCEMENT ON THE RADIO OR IN THE NEWSPAPER, NO WARNING EXCEPT THE FAINT SOUND OF CALLIOPE MUSIC RIDING THE BREEZE.
THE PEOPLE CAME ANYWAY.
THEY WALKED AWAY FROM OPEN CASH REGISTERS AND RUNNING BATHS.
THEY LEFT THEIR CARS RUNNING AND THEIR DINNERS HALF FINISHED ON THE TABLE.
LADIES AND GENTLEMEN!
BECAUSE EVERYONE LOVES THE CIRCUS...
...TO DEATH.
WELCOME TO THE GREATEST SHOW ON EARTH!

AND THE STAR ATTRACTION IS... *YOU!*
YES, YOU.
COME OUT OF THE SHADOWS.
TAKE YOUR PLACE IN THE SPOTLIGHT.
FEEL THE *THRILL* OF POWER IT OFFERS.
EMBRACE THE *ESCAPE*...
...FROM YOUR OTHERWISE UNREMARKABLE...
...AND *DISPOSABLE* LIFE.
YOU'LL BE GLAD YOU DID.

COME ONE, COME ALL!
THIS IS A NIGHT OF WORTHY SACRIFICE AND BLOODY GOOD ENTERTAINMENT.

I FOUND THREE OTHER EMPTY TOWNS WITHIN A HUNDRED MILES OF THORN.
EVERY FRONT PORCH HAS A NEWSPAPER ON IT. THE DATES ON THEM ARE LIKE A DEAD CALENDAR.
THE CIRCUS IS MOVING STEADILY EAST, DAY BY DAY, AND I'M FOLLOWING HOT ON THEIR TRAIL.
I CAN SMELL THE SIN IN THE AIR.
TONIGHT, THERE WILL BE *VENGEANCE.*

WE'VE HEARD RUMORS OF YOUR ENGINE GROWLING IN THE NIGHT--
--WE KNEW IT WOULDN'T BE LONG BEFORE YOU FOUND US.
SO WE WERE READY.
THE BIG TOP IS A PLACE OF WONDERS...
...WHERE NOTHING IS IMPOSSIBLE.
SO EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED, GHOST RIDER!
WHAT IF THE INNOCENTS WHO COMPEL YOU TO FIGHT...

...ARE THE *MONSTER* YOU MUST NOW VANQUISH?
YOU THINK YOU'VE TRAPPED ME--

--BUT YOU'VE ALREADY IMPRISONED YOURSELF.
YOU MIGHT BE ABLE TO MESMERIZE A MIND, RINGMASTER--
--BUT I CAN DO THE SAME WITH A SOUL.
I CAN FEEL YOU INSIDE THEM.

LIKE A SICKNESS...
HURRGG
...THE CIRCUS OF CRIME MUST BE PURGED.
THE REST OF YOU--GO!
FIND YOUR WAY HOME AND NEVER THINK OF THIS NIGHT AGAIN.
YOU...
I KNOW YOU...BUT I DON'T KNOW YOU.
THIS ISN'T YOUR WAY.
YOU'RE NOT YOURSELVES.
NEITHER ARE YOU, JOHNNY.
MAYBE IT'S THE RINGMASTER'S HYPNOSIS. BUT SOMETHING PULSES IN MY BRAIN, AND...
...I FLASH IN AND OUT OF CONSCIOUSNESS.

THIS TIME, WHEN I WAKE FULLY, IT'S DIFFERENT.
I FEEL HOT AND COLD AT THE SAME TIME, LIKE SOMEONE JUST DOUSED A FIRE.
THE RIDER ALWAYS LEAVES ME IN A BARN, BEHIND A DUMPSTER, IN THE WOODS.
THE FACT THAT I'M WAKING UP IN THE MIDDLE OF THE HIGHWAY MAKES ME FEEL LIKE THE SPIRIT OF VENGEANCE...
...JUST RAN OUT OF FUEL.
I'M STILL SICK. IN MY BODY. IN MY MIND.
I STILL FEEL POISONED. BUT MAYBE... NOT BY *HIM*.
MAYBE HE HASN'T BEEN KEEPING ME IN THE DARK BECAUSE HE'S PUNISHING ME.
MAYBE IT'S BECAUSE HE DOESN'T *TRUST* ME.
BECAUSE I'VE BEEN *COMPROMISED*.

SOMETIMES HE LEAVES ME MESSAGES.
SSSSSS
CLUES...
HRRRRN.
...COMMANDS...
...WARNINGS.
THREE DAYS
HELL'S BACKBONE RALLY
RIDE OR DIE

NUMBER FIVE

"Hell's Backbone"

WHEN I WAS A KID, I HAD TROUBLE CONTROLLING MYSELF.
TANTRUM DOESN'T FEEL LIKE AN ADEQUATE WORD.
I'D HIT. I'D BITE. I'D GET RED-FACED AND WILD-EYED.
I'D CRY OR I'D SCREAM IN A WAY THAT SOUNDED LIKE HOWLING.
"THE WOLF FOUND YOU."
THAT'S WHAT MY FATHER, CRASH, WOULD SAY ABOUT ME IN THOSE MOMENTS.
IF YOU EVER CRIED SO HARD, YOUR EYES AND LUNGS HURT...
IF YOU EVER RAGED SO HARD, YOUR BODY WON'T STOP SHAKING...
...YOU GOT SOME SMALL SENSE OF WHAT I GO THROUGH EVERY TIME I CHANGE...
...EVERY TIME I BECOME THE *GHOST RIDER.*

THE WOLF FINDS ME.
AND IT CLAWS AND DRAGS ALL THESE TERRIBLE FEELINGS OUT OF ME...
...TURNING ME INSIDE OUT, DEMANDING TO BE HEARD--NOW.
QUESTION IS...WHO'S THE REAL ME?
THE GUY WHO KEEPS ALL THAT SWALLOWED DOWN?
OR THE GUY WHO GOES #%@& WILD?
I'D LIKE TO BLAME EVERYTHING THAT'S GONE **WRONG** IN MY LIFE ON THE SPIRIT OF VENGEANCE.
BUT WE ALWAYS LIKE TO BLAME SOMEONE ELSE OR SOMETHING ELSE FOR OUR WORST BEHAVIOR.

THE RIDER TOLD ME TO COME HERE--TO ESCALANTE, UTAH.
OR BEGGED ME, I'M NOT SURE.
"RIDE OR DIE."
THAT'S WHAT THE MESSAGE--ETCHED IN MOLTEN ASPHALT--TOLD ME.
WE'VE TRAVELED A LONG WAY TO GET HERE.
WE'RE BARELY HOLDING ON, FLARING IN AND OUT, LIKE A BAD SPARK PLUG.
CAN'T SPEAK FOR US BOTH, BUT I GET THE SENSE WE'RE COUNTING ON THIS BEING THE END OF THE ROAD.
HELL'S BACKBONE IS NOT ONLY CONSIDERED ONE OF THE MOST DANGEROUS DRIVES IN THE COUNTRY...
HELL'S BACKBONE RALLY
...IT'S ALSO RUMORED TO BE A VORTEX. A PLACE WHERE THE VEIL BETWEEN WORLDS IS THIN--FRAIL.
THAT FEELS LIKE THE VERSION OF THE WORLD I'VE BEEN LIVING IN LATELY.

SOMEWHERE IN IDAHO.
WHY ARE YOU TRYING TO STOP ME?
WHY DON'T YOU WANT ME TO HUNT DOWN THE GHOST RIDER?
DENT BROS AUTO REPAIR
ARE YOU WORKING WITH HIM?
ZEB WORKS FOR ZEB.
I AIN'T *WITH* THE RIDER. BUT I AIN'T *AGAINST* HIM EITHER.
BUT LET'S SAY I GOT ME A VESTED INTEREST IN THE BALANCE.
WHAT BALANCE?
BALANCE OF LIGHT...
KINSH
KAK KAK KAK KAK KAK
...AND SHADOWS.

YOU'RE NOT ONLY SCREWING WITH THE WRONG MAGICIAN...
KAK
KAK
KAK
...YOU GOT YOUR CROSSHAIRS ON THE WRONG TARGET.
KAK
KAK
KAK
KAK
KAK
COULD HAVE THEM PECK YOU DOWN TO THE BONE IF I WANTED.
BUT YOU GOT BIG STONES, TALIA WARROAD.
I DIG THAT ABOUT YOU.
SO I'M GOING TO GIVE YOU A SECOND-- ERP.
THAK

WHILMER...
DIDN'T KNOW YOU HAD IT IN YOU.
THERE'S SO MUCH I HAVE *IN ME* THAT YOU DON'T KNOW ABOUT.

WE'RE ALL HERE FOR THE SAME REASON.
RUM RUMM
RUMM RUMM
THE RACE BEGINS AT SUNSET...
...WHEN DARKNESS ANNOUNCES ITSELF LIKE A STARTER PISTOL.
RUM
RUMM
RUM
RUMM
RUMM

YOU'D ONLY KNOW ABOUT THE HELL'S BACKBONE RALLY IF YOU HUNG OUT IN THE WRONG KIND OF BARS AND TRUCK STOPS AND INTERNET CHATROOMS.
IT'S ALMOST LIKE A COLLECTIVE MYSTICAL WHISPER FOUND US AND DREW US HERE.
A PRIZE HAS BEEN PROMISED.
IF YOU RIDE HELL'S BACKBONE--FROM TAIL TO HORNS--YOU GET TO HOLD COUNSEL WITH *THE DEVIL.*
AND HE'LL GIVE YOU *ANYTHING* YOU WISH.
FOR SOMEBODY LOOKING FOR TROUBLE...
...OR SOMEBODY LOOKING FOR PENANCE...
...OR SOMEBODY WHO ISN'T AFRAID TO FIGHT GODS OR DEMONS...
...THAT TROPHY IS WORTH WHATEVER HAIRPIN TURNS AND DEADLY DROPS LIE AHEAD.

SCREEEEE
MAYBE BLACK WIDOW IS HERE TO ASK FORGIVENESS FOR HER SINS.
MAYBE MOON KNIGHT WANTS TO PREVENT THE WRONG PEOPLE FROM GETTING TO THE FINISH LINE.
I DON'T KNOW. JUST AS I DON'T KNOW...
...WHETHER THE PRIZE PROMISED IS JUST THE BAIT AT THE END OF A HOOK.
I LEARNED EARLY ON THAT HELL DOESN'T MAKE GOOD ON ITS PROMISES.
IF I WIN THIS THING, I'M NOT GOING TO ASK ANY FAVORS OF THE DEVIL...
...BUT I WILL DEMAND ANSWERS.

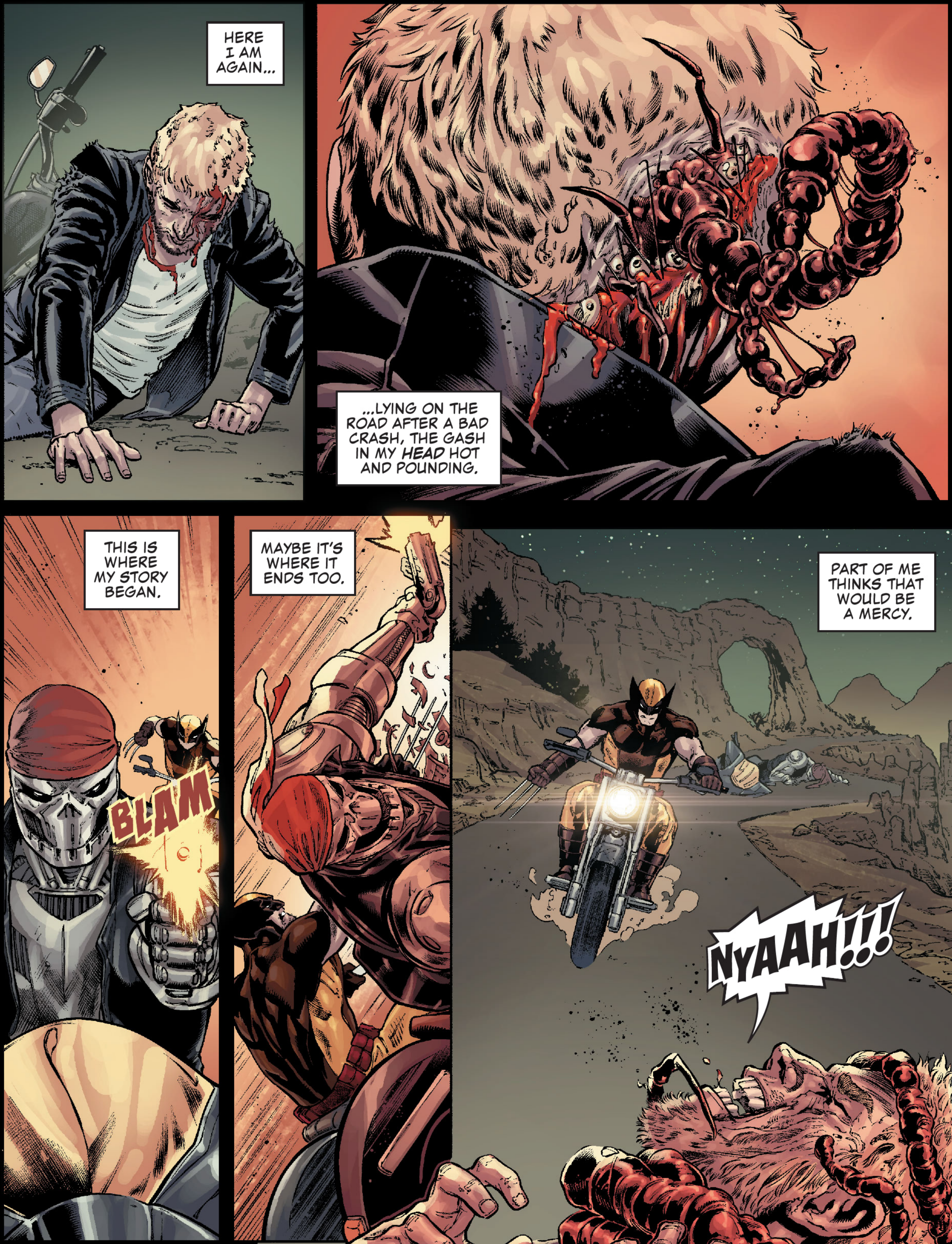
I'M HERE LESS FOR THE FINISH LINE...
...AND MORE FOR THE FIGHT I DISCOVER ALONG THE WAY.
THERE ARE NO INNOCENTS HERE.
WHICH MEANS I'M ON MY OWN.
THE SPIRIT OF VENGEANCE HAS LEFT IT UP TO ME TO RIDE *LIKE HELL*.

I DON'T KNOW EVERYBODY HERE, BUT I RECOGNIZE PLENTY.
FRIENDS, ENEMIES--SOMETIMES BOTH CRUSHED INTO THE SAME BODY.
NOBODY CAME LOOKING FOR ME WHEN I NEEDED THEM.
BLAZE...
IF I MEAN THAT LITTLE TO THEM...
...THEY BELONG IN MY REARVIEW MIRROR.
THEN SOMETHING HAPPENS.
HSSSSS!
THE BLACKNESS OF THE ROAD SEEMS TO LURCH UP...

...LIKE A LIVING SHADOW.
THE AIR GROWS COLD IN PATCHES.
HELP!
OH GOD... IT'S PULLING ME DOWN!
I GET A WHIFF OF SOMETHING LIKE CELLAR-FLOOR PUDDLES OR THE WIND POURING OUT OF A CAVE.
WHEN I BREATHE, IT'S LIKE I'M DRINKING ***DARKNESS.***

I FEEL SUDDENLY TRANSPORTED BACK TO HAYDEN'S FALLS...
...BACK TO THE MINE SHAFT BEHIND THE MOTEL, BACK TO THE RED ROAD, BACK TO THE BIG TOP NIGHTMARE HOSTED BY THE CIRCUS OF CRIME...
...PLACES WHERE THE SHADOWS SPILLED OVER AND CONQUERED THE LIGHT.
I KNOW NOW WHY WE WERE BROUGHT HERE.

THIS ISN'T A RACE.
GAH!
BLAM
IT'S A RECRUITMENT *GATHERING.*
BLAM BLAM
THERE'S NOBODY HERE WHO HASN'T EATEN THEIR SHARE AT THE SIN BUFFET.
WHY SHOULD HELL WAIT FOR US WHEN WE'LL GLADLY DELIVER OURSELVES RIGHT TO THE DEVIL?
PWAP
BY COMING HERE, WE'VE UNKNOWINGLY BEEN ENLISTED IN AN ARMY OF SHADOWS.
IT DOESN'T MATTER IF ANYBODY MAKES IT TO THE HORNED PEAK OF THE MOUNTAIN.
NOBODY WINS TONIGHT.


HERE I AM AGAIN...
...LYING ON THE ROAD AFTER A BAD CRASH, THE GASH IN MY *HEAD* HOT AND POUNDING.
THIS IS WHERE MY STORY BEGAN.
BLAM
MAYBE IT'S WHERE IT ENDS TOO.
PART OF ME THINKS THAT WOULD BE A MERCY.
NYAAH!!!

SHOULD'VE KNOWN BETTER THAN TO COME HERE.
SNAKT
THAT GOES FOR BOTH OF US.
I KNOW WHAT WOLVERINE MEANS. WHEN YOU'VE BEEN TO HELL AND BACK, YOU CARRY THOSE CHAINS WITH YOU.
IT'S HARD TO PASS ON A CHANCE TO LOSE THEM.
LOGAN... ACK.
THE #$%@ IS WRONG WITH YOU?
DON'T WORRY ABOUT ME.
AND FORGET WHATEVER--*HURK*--BROUGHT YOU HERE.
WE GOTTA CLOSE THIS ROAD.
END THIS-- ERG-- RACE.

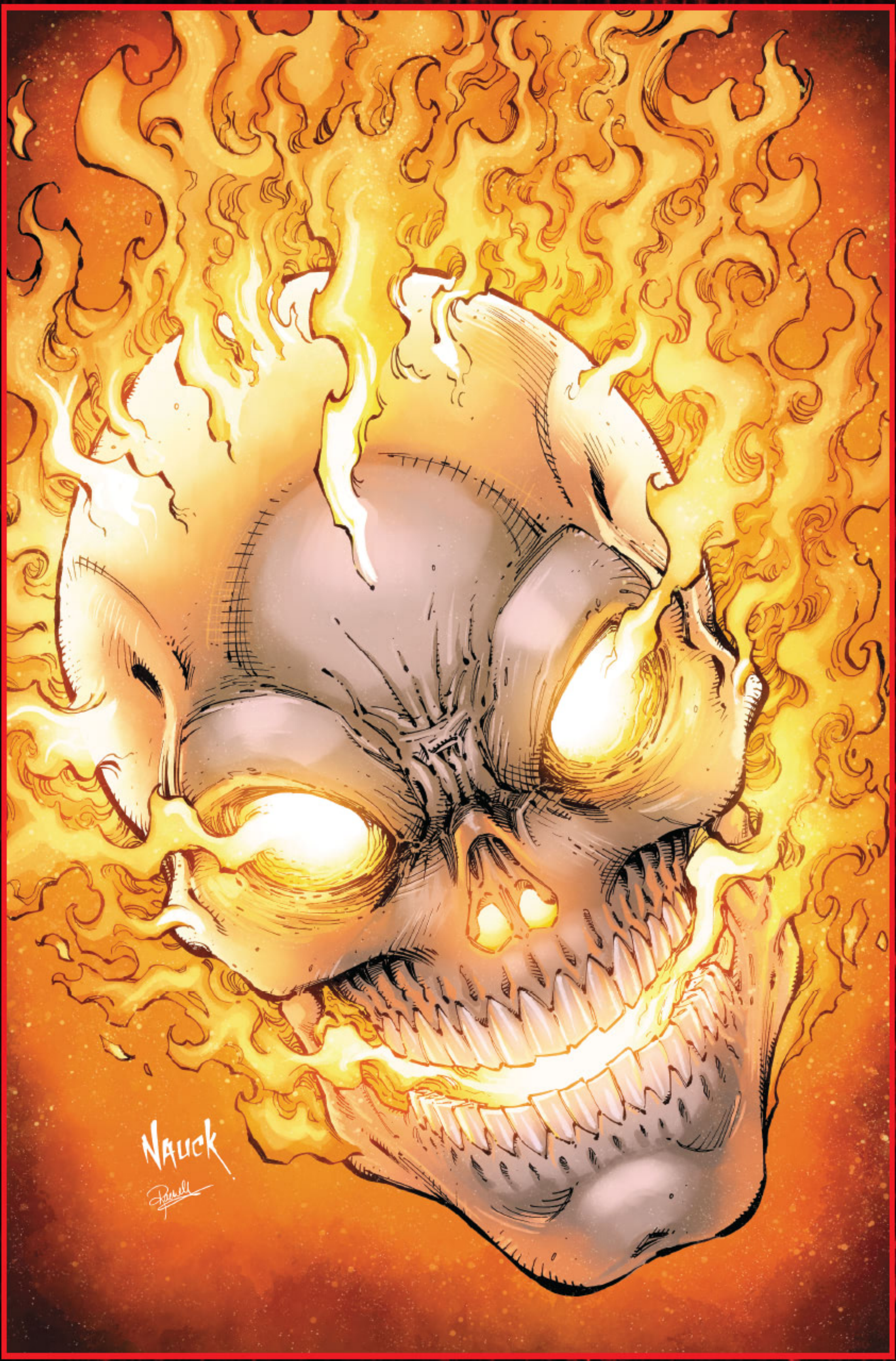
HOLD ON, JOHNNY.
SNIKT
I'M GOING TO POP THE TANK...
SKISH
...AND ADD A SPARK.
SCREEEEEE
TANK IS SLOSHED FULL OF NITRO ACCELERANTS.

SHOULD MAKE FOR A GOOD *BLAZE.*
KROOM
ALL RIGHT. ENOUGH HELL-RAISING.
WHAT SAY WE GET OFF THE MOUNTAIN AND GRAB A COLD ONE DOWN IN--?
JOHNNY?
JOHNNY!

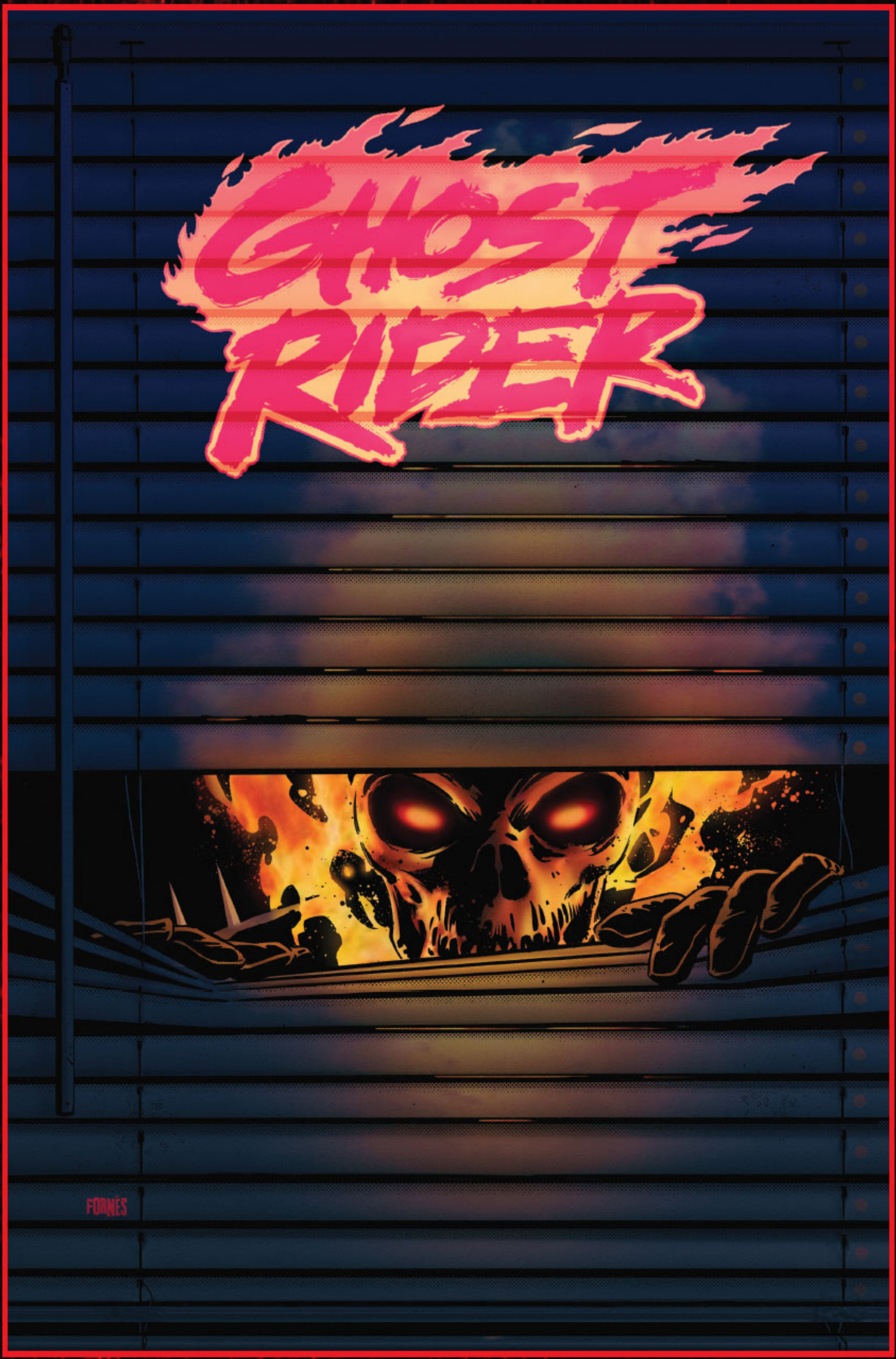
I TRIED TO GIVE YOU A GOOD, QUIET LIFE, AND YOU REJECTED THAT FOR VIOLENCE.

SO I TRIED TO ENLIST YOUR VIOLENCE FOR A GRANDER PURPOSE, BUT YOU REJECTED THAT TOO.
IF YOU'RE NOT GOING TO JOIN US...IN OUR PATH TO A *SHADOW COUNTRY*...
...THEN I, BLACKHEART, WILL HAVE TO END JOHNNY BLAZE.

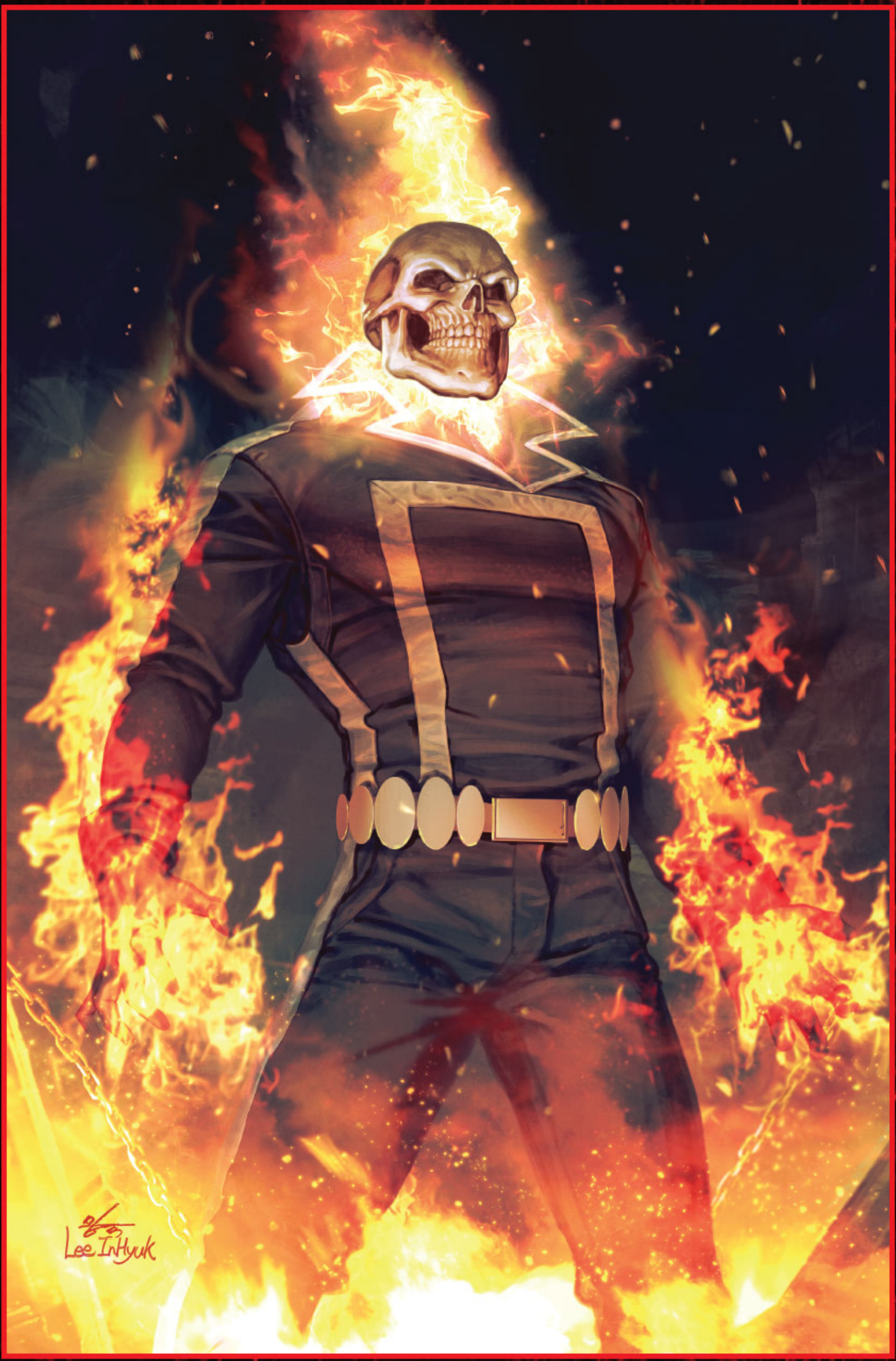
AND THE GHOST RIDER.
NEXT: THE EXORCISM OF JOHNNY BLAZE!



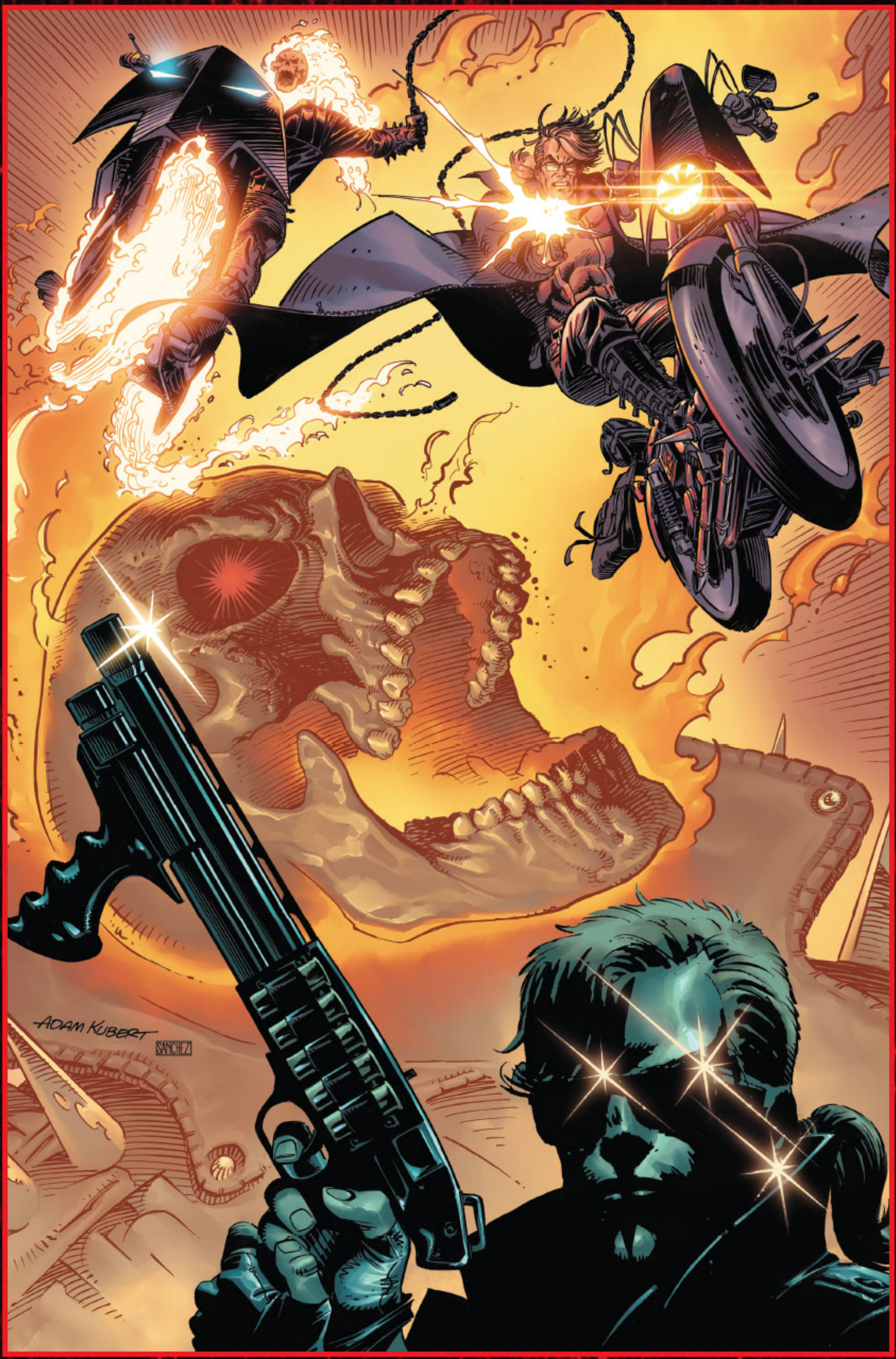
#1 Headshot Variant by
TODD NAUCK & RACHELLE ROSENBERG


GHOST RIDER
FORNÉS

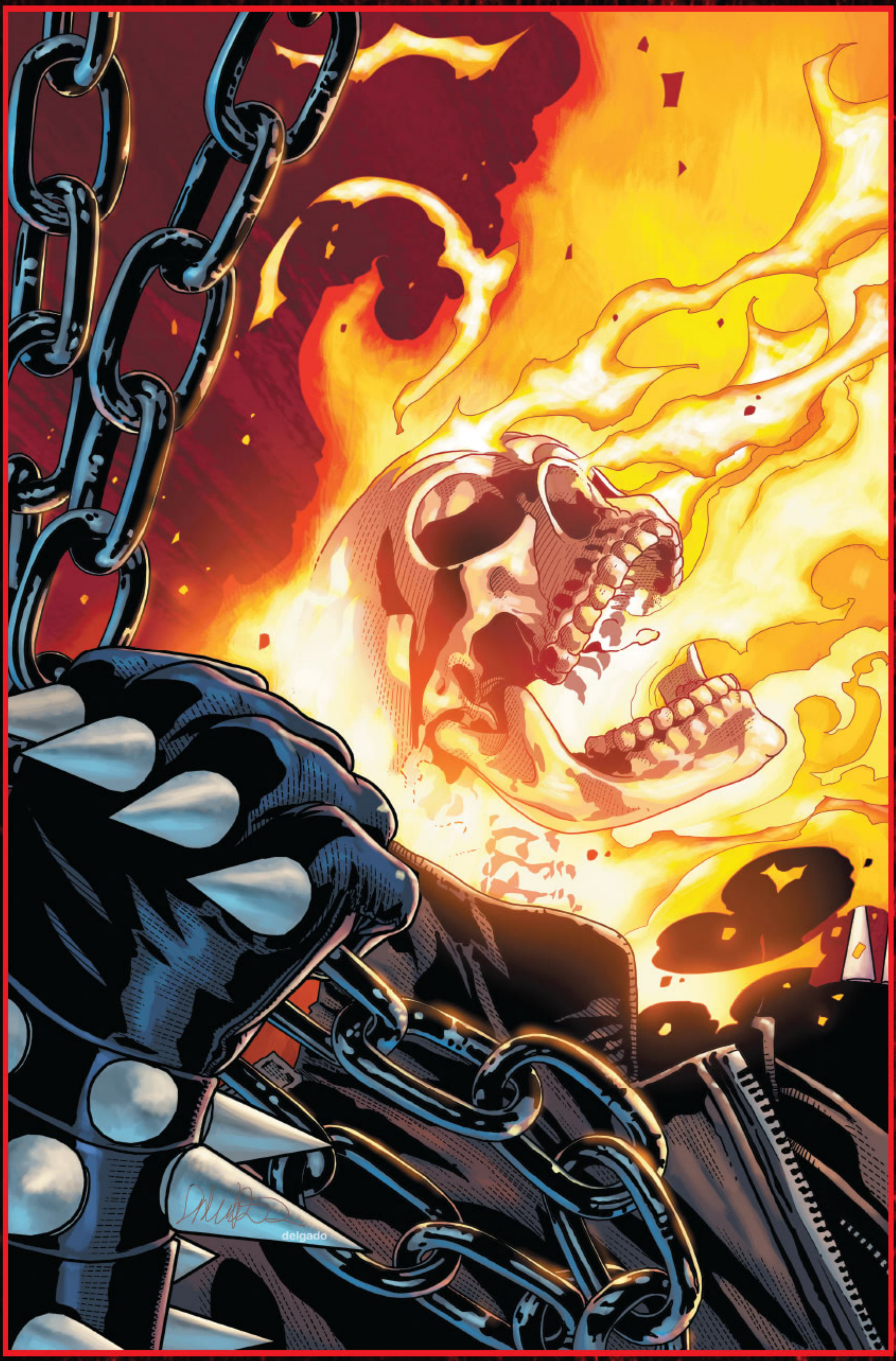
#1 Window Shades Variant by
JORGE FORNÉS



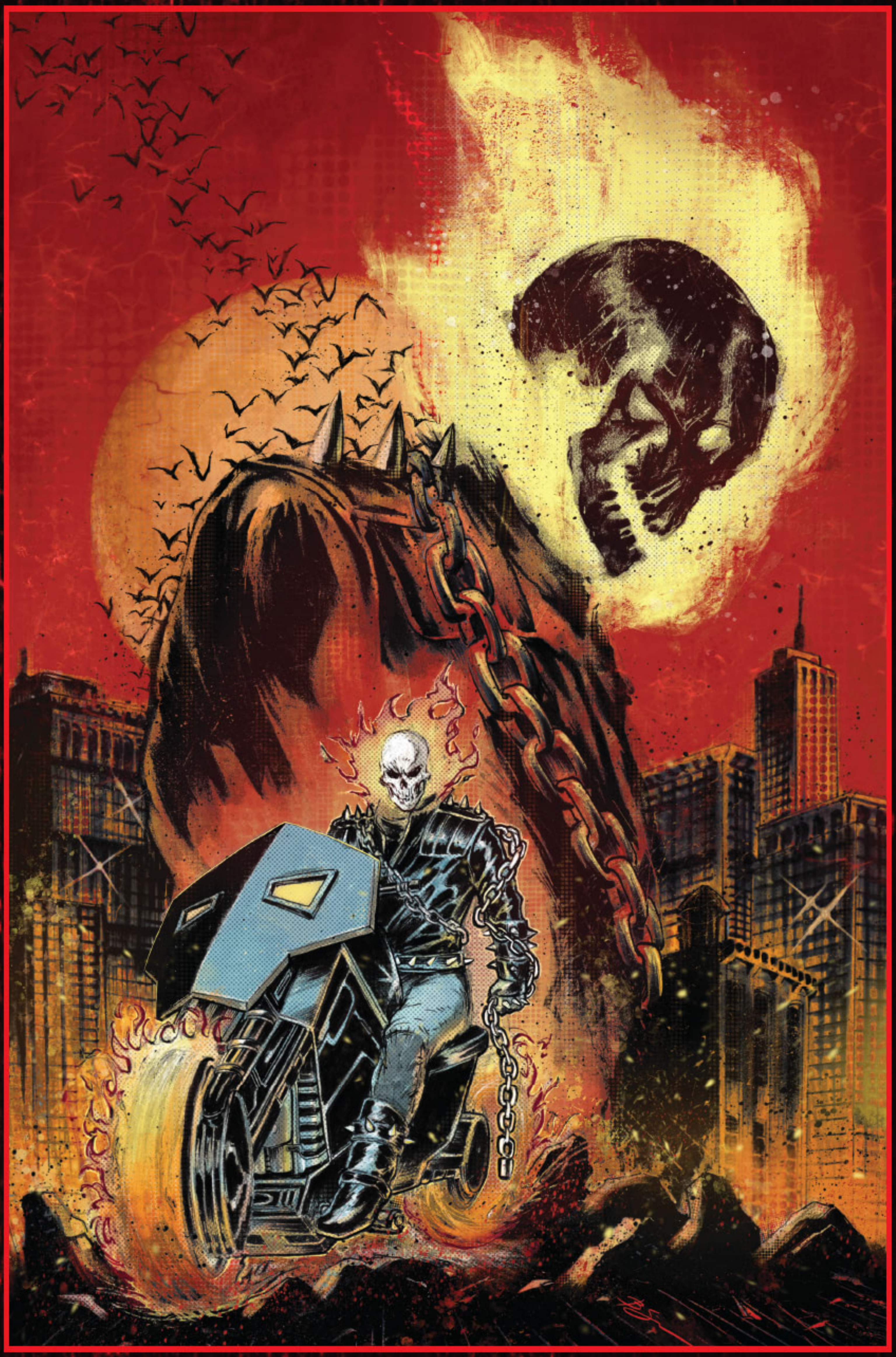
#1 Variant by
INHYUK LEE


ADAM KUBERT
SÁNCHEZ

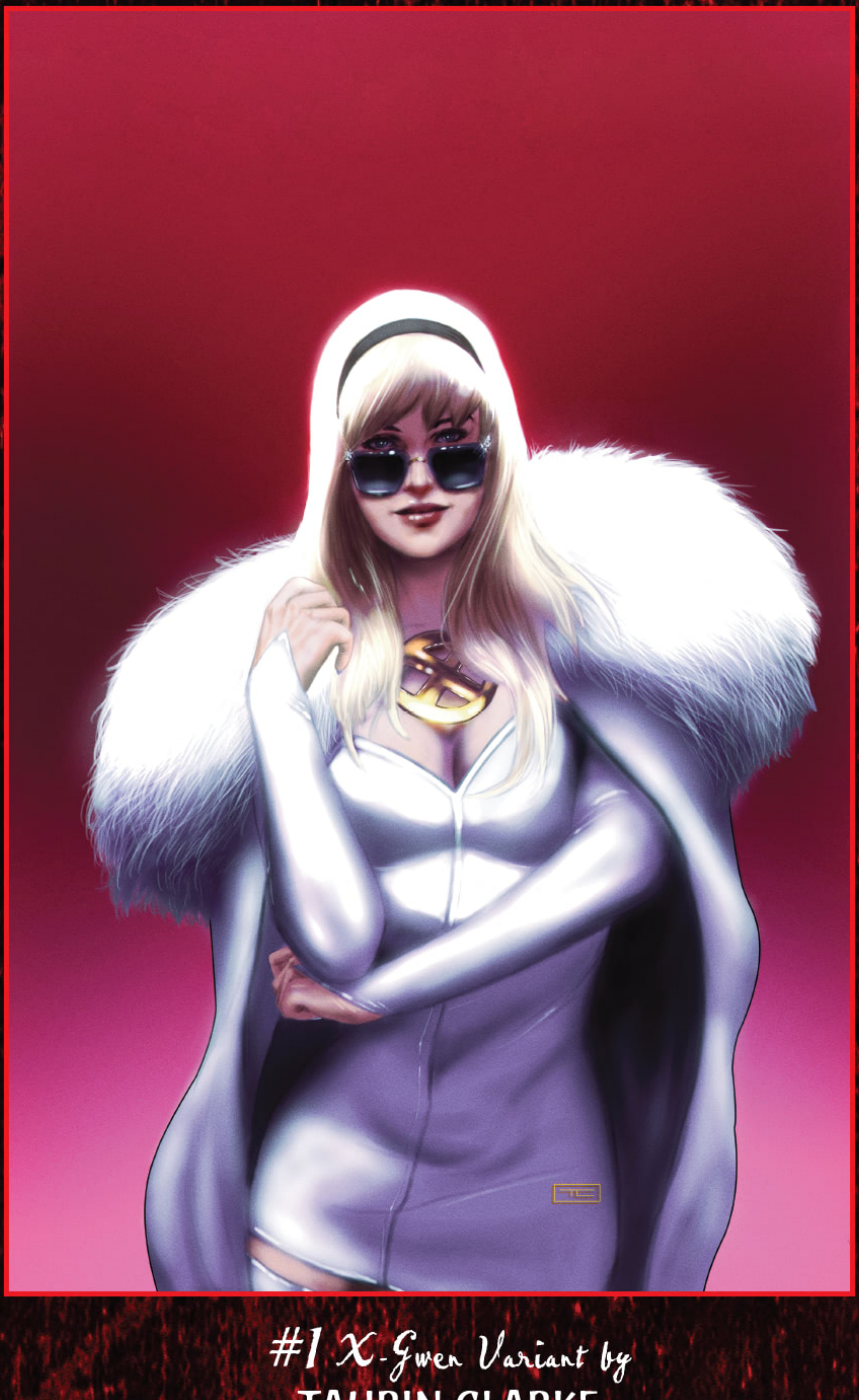
#1 Hidden Gem Variant by
ADAM KUBERT & ALEJANDRO SÁNCHEZ



#1 Variant by
SALVADOR LARROCA & EDGAR DELGADO



#1 Variant by
BENJAMIN SU



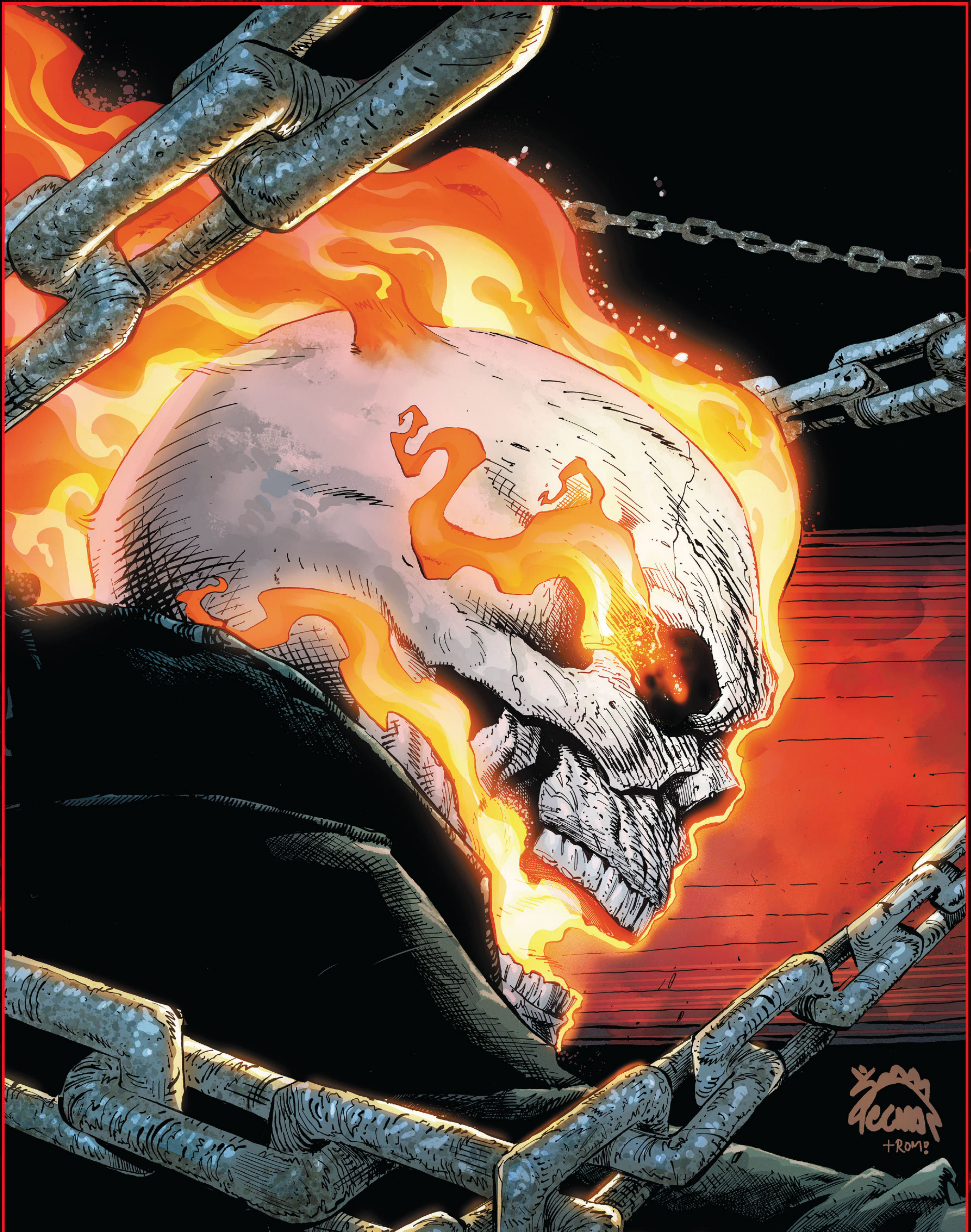
#1 X-Gwen Variant by
TAURIN CLARKE

#1 Variant by PEACH MOMOKO

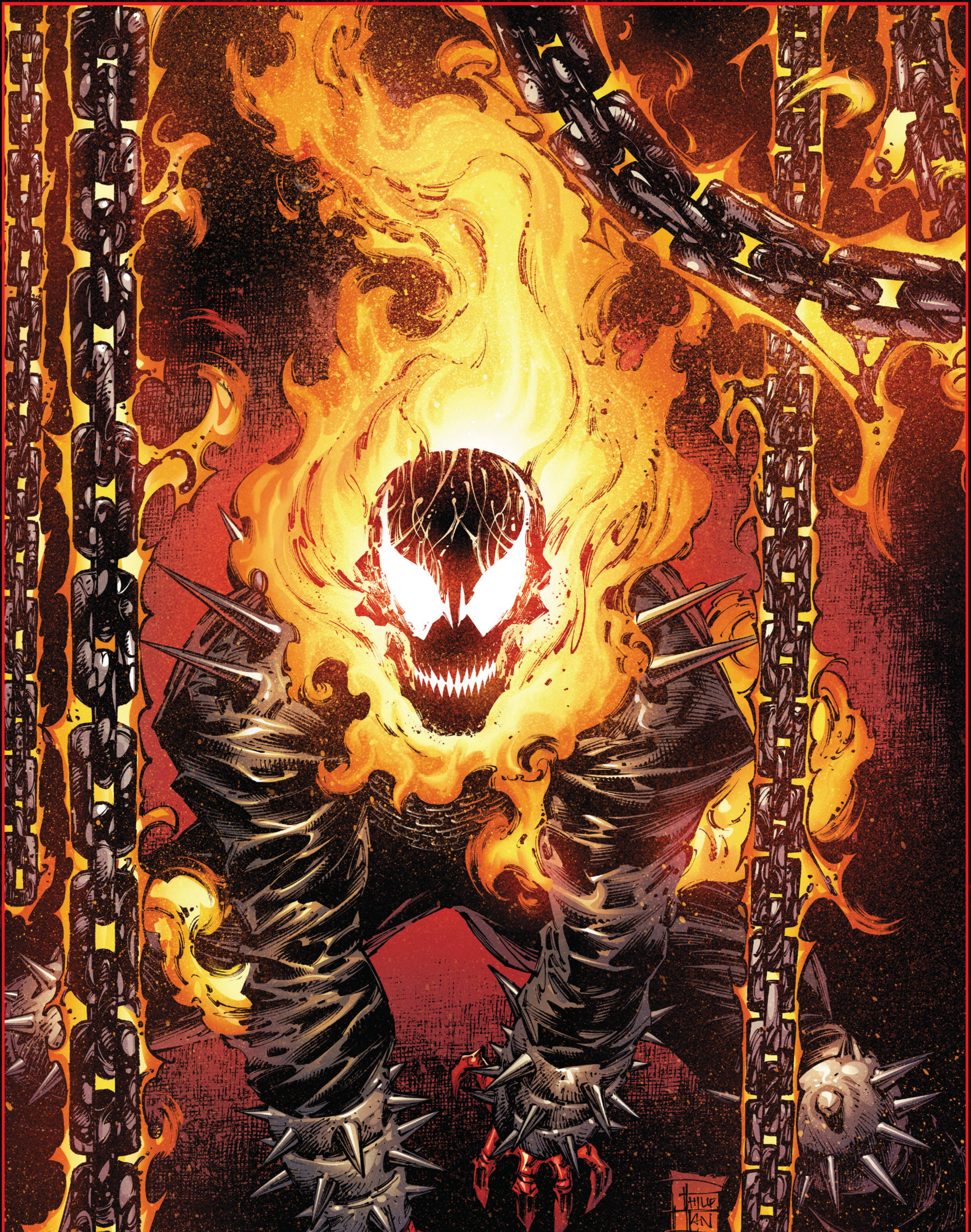
#1 Wraparound Variant by RYAN STEGMAN, JP MAYER & MARTE GARCIA

SKOTTIE YOUNG 2022

#1 Variant by SKOTTIE YOUNG



#1 2ND Printing Variant by RYAN STEGMAN, JP MAYER & MARTE GARCIA



#2 *Carnage Forever Variant by* PHILIP TAN & RICHARD ISANOVE

#2 *Variant by* PEACH MOMOKO

#2 *Variant by* DANIEL ACUÑA

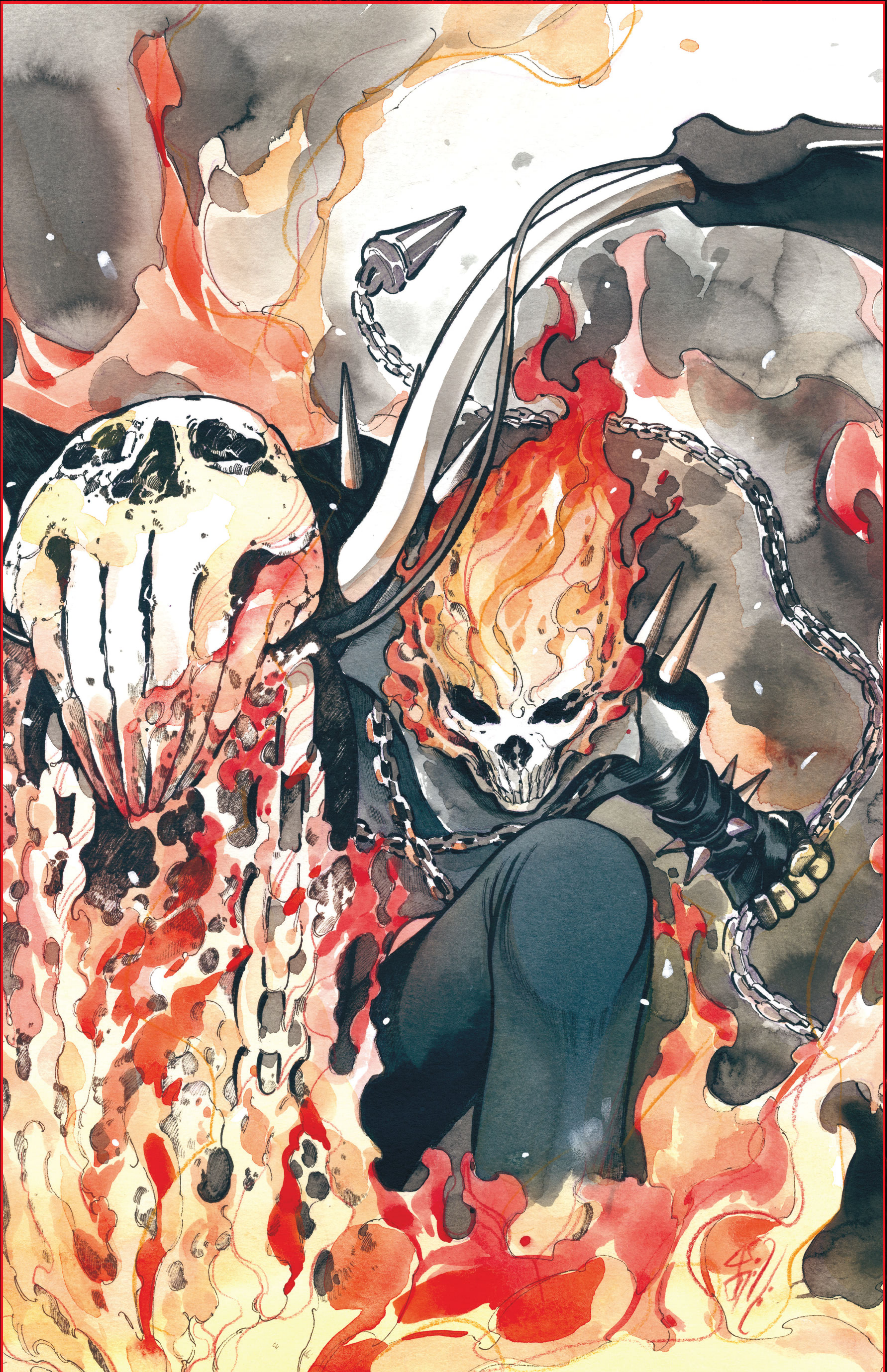
#3 Spider-Man 60th Anniversary Variant by FRANCESCO MOBILI & ROMULO FAJARDO JR.

#3 Stormbreakers Variant by PEACH MOMOKO

#3 *Variant by* GREG LAND & FRANK D'ARMATA

22
ISRAEL SILVA

#4 Skrull Variant by DAVID BALDEÓN & ISRAEL SILVA



#4 Variant by PEACH MOMOKO

#5 *Variant by* CARLOS MAGNO & ALEX GUIMARÃES

"The exact kind of heavy metal insanity you want and need from a comic starring Marvel's Spirit of Vengeance." – Monkeys Fighting Robots

GHOST RIDER GOES BACK TO
FLAMING-SKULLED BASICS!

JOHNNY BLAZE IS IN A HAZE. He has the perfect life: idyllic small town, wife and kids, dog – the American Dream. Except for the nightmares. Blaze is having terrifying visions and has a constant, pounding headache – like something inside him is trying to get out. This world he's living in is too good to be true. In fact, it's more like a prison. But who would purposely be keeping the Spirit of Vengeance on the sidelines – and how? Meanwhile, the F.B.I. has recently discovered a frightening and unexplained surge in supernatural activity. And that can mean only one thing: It's time for Blaze to hit the dark roads of the Marvel Universe once more, confronting its monsters and battling his demons. Let's ride!

T+

COLLECTING ***GHOST RIDER (2022) #1-5*** – BY BENJAMIN PERCY, CORY SMITH, BRENT PEEPLES,
ROBERTO POGGI, OREN JUNIOR AND BRYAN VALENZA.

Jack.T.Ripper
BLOODY MARVELOUS!